



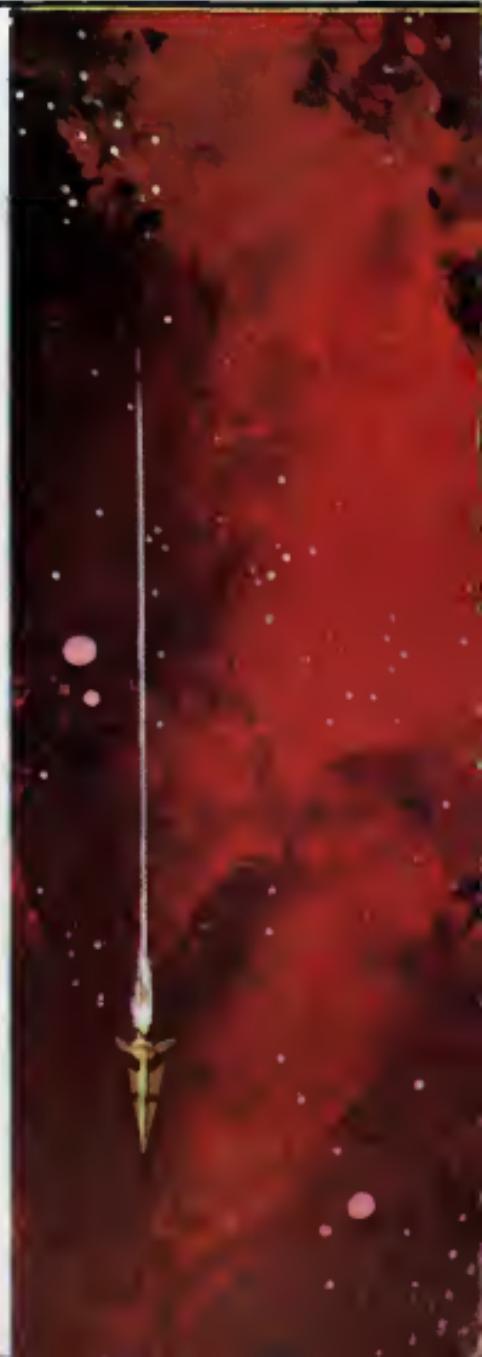
sf impulse

Michael
MOORCOCK
Brian W. ALOISSL
Keith ROBERTS
Eric C. WILLIAMS
Richard WILSON
Kenneth BULMER
Thomas M. OISCH
meets

**KINGSLEY
AMIS**

**EDITOR IN
CHIEF**

**HARRY
HARRISON**



sf impulse

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Editorial by Harry Harrison

—Salerno, Italy.

"Tell me, Mr. Harrison, do you believe that there is intelligent life on Mars?"

"I believe that there is life on Mars, but when we meet the Martian life forms the chances are that we will eat them, not shake their hands."

Not a very brilliant or original exchange, but it is worth noting because it is part of an interview that was broadcast by Radio Roma in Italy. (It was also done in Italian, and your editor's primitive command of this language was just up to this oversimplification of the fact that any life found on Mars will be microscopic or, at best, about the size of an Earth lichen.) The occasion was the annual festival of science fiction films in Trieste. Italy is a country that has given a whole-hearted reception to science fiction that is immensely cheering and that could very well stand as a golden example to the rest of the world. Only the old guard literary critics are still against it and, like old guard literary critics everywhere, they are against everything outside their own special interests. Italian friends reassure me that their opinions can be discounted. In this respect we should remember C. S. Lewis' observation that science fiction will only be accepted when the present crop of critics "die and rot."

In a way we should feel a little humble, because the science fiction that they enjoy here is British and American. Some German space operas get translated, and a few French novels, and some Italian writers do stories under Anglo-Saxon pen names, but this is a very small percentage of the total. (There are a few very good Italian sf writers, but that is another topic.) In the current issue of GAMMA, probably Italy's best sf magazine, there are seven stories, and only one is written by an Italian. The rest are by authors familiar to us all.

One thing the Italians have done, that no other country has been able to do, is to invent a term for science fiction that equals—or betters—the original. *Fantascienza*. It means more than just "fantasy-science" since fantasy has

overtones in Italian of imagination, freedom and enthusiasm.

And enthusiasm was what we found in Trieste. I'll not give you a report on the festival, you'll find that in another issue, but I would like to convey the feeling of acceptance we experienced. The idea of the festival itself is an enthusiastic one, and I only wish that there were better films available. Almost all of the ones shown, the pick of last year's output, were of the Slime Monster from the Planet Regurgo variety. Next year's crop should be better since there seem to be a number of superior sf films in production around the world just now. But this did not dampen the official or public enthusiasm, and the press gave good coverage to all the films and events. In addition to the films, there was a round table on the existence of extra-terrestrial life. Arthur C. Clarke flew in to speak for this, and was well received by the press, much interviewed and televised. In fact the television interview was a masterpiece of Italian virtuosity.

It should be appreciated that this sort of thing is done differently in different countries. When the BBC does an interview they take you aside first—and buy you a drink, that can't be denied—and rough out the questions and answers. You are then seated in a rather sturdy chair which limits body motion to flipping the hands and dramatic crossing of the legs. While there is no head clamp, it is suggested that violent gestures throw the subject out of focus. Now I have nothing against Aunty's methods, but it must be said that other systems are possible. Including that of Italian television, which might be called the fantascientific.

Both Arthur Clarke and I were asked to appear, and we were assured that we could answer the questions in English, which would be dubbed later in Italian. We stepped out of the meeting hall and were rushed into a Fiat 500, a smallish vehicle that resembles a large beer can with doors, and driven at racecourse speed to a long pier on the waterfront. A microphone was hooked under Arthur's necktie and an English translation of the first question shoved into his hand. The microphone was plugged into a portable tape recorder, the cameraman moved in close with a hand-held camera and someone shouted *pronto!* The interviewer

asked his question; Arthur said, "Science fiction is . . ." and his immortal words faded into the distance as the whole company rushed away down the length of the mole. The cameraman ran alongside with his lens about six inches from Arthur's ear, slowly drawing ahead and turning so that a panorama of the Trieste harbour would be seen beyond the Clarke features. The assistant trotted behind with the tape recorder as the company grew small and vanished in the distance.

The entire festival was like that, with never a hint of the usual condescension towards "that stuff." I have attended many sf conventions and festivals—since the first one in 1939—but this is the first one where I was ever invited by the local tourist office to a banquet, with champagne, in a medieval castle. And it must be remembered that the Italian Auto Club has published a collection of sf auto stories called *Il Grande Dio Auto* (The Great God Auto) and sell it in their offices along with the maps and badges. I'm afraid we'll have to wait a bit before the AA does the same.

Though most of the sf that appears in Italy is already familiar to us, there are a few of the younger writers who are writing good and original sf that is still typically Italian. As soon as it is editorially possible sf IMPULSE will be printing some of these stories.

Closer to home, this issue of our magazine features the second part of THE ICE SCHOONER by Michael Moorcock. This is an entirely new sort of story to come from the Moorcock typewriter, and one that we are very enthusiastic about. There is also an interview with that friend and friendly critic of sf, Kingsley Amis and stories by Thomas M. Disch, Keith Roberts, Eric C. Williams and others. In the forthcoming issue we can say, with some assurance, that there will be the final part of the THE ICE SCHOONER, plus a story by well-known writer and anthologist Judith Merril. Britain may not yet be as enthusiastic about sf as Italy is, but as you can see, we are doing our best to change the image!

— HARRY HARRISON

It was an old dream come true; a machine that could give a man anything in the world. Or nothing. . . . A brilliant aside by two internationally famous authors.

INSIDE OUT

by Kenneth Bulmer and Richard Wilson

Arlendren walked confidently, slightly stiff-gaited, to the jewellery section of the Fifth Avenue department store and with great care placed an ordinary paper-wrapped package on the glass counter above the trays of expensive watches. Fingers still tense from the spaceship controls drummed on the brown paper of the package as the clerk approached.

"I'd like one of these, please," Arlendren said. His accent was adequately nondescript, he thought.

"This watch, sir? An excellent choice." The salesman took it from its tray and laid it reverently on a pad of velvet which accentuated its golden perfection.

Arlendren picked it up, twisted it this way and that, his mind probing the hidden complexities of the watch, judging the aptitudes and skills of the race that had made it.

"How much?" he asked.

The clerk cleared his throat. Obviously he had expected a few more preliminaries. "Three hundred and seventy-five fifty," he said softly. "Plus tax."

"That's dollars," Arlendren said, more in observation than question.

"Yes, sir; with tax it comes to four hundred and thirteen o five." He watched his customer for a moment, then said: "We have some very fine watches in a—less expensive range."

"Dollars," Arlendren said, as if concentrating. He unwrapped his package, opened the lid of the box inside and took out several bills neatly engraved with portraits of illustrious presidents.

Duke Walsh, down the aisle near men's gloves and

scarves, had not bothered with the transaction up to that point. His furtive eyes had been casing the store, filing away information that might be valuable.

"Of course if you *prefer* to pay cash, sir—" the clerk said to Arlendren.

"Yes, cash. Isn't it all right?"

"Certainly. But if you'll wait just a moment, I think the section manager would like to serve you himself."

Duke Walsh's fingers tingled. He watched the scene with professional interest. He stared covertly, afraid that if he turned away this great good fortune would pass him by. Again Duke noted the pile of bills on the counter but he was more intrigued by the box they had come from. A plain square metal box, from the look of it, about five inches to a side, wrapped in the ordinary brown paper used in every department store.

Duke, gambling that he had time, disappeared through a service door and, remarkably quickly, reappeared with a duplicate of the package.

The section manager was with Arlendren now and apparently he was suspicious of the large amount of cash. Duke could tell suspicion a mile off. But the customer seemed to notice nothing and eventually the cash was taken, the watch wrapped, the metal box re-wrapped and the customer out of the door, Duke Walsh at his heels.

Arlendren stepped out along Fifth Avenue with his rapid but slightly stiff gait. He wished his mission were over. Thoughts of familiar things at home called him strongly but he had a duty here on this savage planet. He must discover what he could of these people's technology, their ways of thinking, their probable reaction to possible events.

Duke chose his moment well. At a busy corner, where two streams of pedestrians came together at right angles, someone bumped into Arlendren sharply, his parcel fell and a slight, nondescript man picked it up. Arlendren took the dummy parcel with thanks and Duke, having made the switch, was off with the real one.

Arlendren reached his hotel room, shut the door and without taking off his coat sat down to examine the watch. He placed the paper-wrapped box on the bed.

The trip to Earth had been accomplished in secrecy and the box, though not the only one of its kind, was like

nothing else on Earth. It might never be for Earth—but that remained to be seen. At the moment its function on Earth was to provide its bearer with the necessities of his journey and his mission.

Food and money had come out of the box. It could also provided a devastating hand weapon if one were needed. Had he wished, Arlendren could have produced from the box a diamond the size of his fist, since his planet also had minerals of that type; but he could not have produced a watch. A timepiece, yes, which would have accurately measured the time on the planet he came from, but which would have been useless on Earth.

Arlendren's choice of a watch had been no idle one. From it he could learn much. This one small but complex instrument could show him the duration of the terrestrial day and how terrestrials measured the time that drove them on, hour by hour, to the great destiny they had tapped and which was now threatening to affect the destinies of planets beyond.

It was a simple step, the purchase of this gold watch, but an important one in Arlendren's mission and the missions of others to follow.

Now, having studied the watch, Arlendren could duplicate it. He took up the brown paper package and unwrapped the box.

It was not the same box. A fair imitation, the same shape, but not the same box.

Dismay grew in him. He shuddered as he assessed the dangers that could result if the box fell into alien hands. With the box, the alien could wish for anything the mind of man could conceive. Anything at all. And he would receive it.

Arlendren cursed an unearthly curse.

Duke Walsh walked quickly away from the corner, but not too quickly. He did not look back but took many turns before ducking into a subway. He went one station, changed to an express, got off at the next stop, then got on again just before the doors closed. It was not likely that he had been followed, but Duke believed in insurance.

In his room, finally, he unwrapped the parcel. A square metal box, apparently full of money. He wasted no time

speculating why anyone should carry cash around in just that way. Some people even carried it in paper bags. It was no business of Duke's. His business was to steal it if he could.

He lifted the lid, thinking of the money inside. Duke always thought positively. Lots of money, he was thinking.

The box, of course, was full of money, as he had thought. Lots of money.

He looked at it, crammed in as he had imagined it would be, not stacked as if fresh from a bank.

He thought, again positively, "There must be five thousand bucks here!"

There was, exactly.

Duke removed it reverently. He counted it twice. The box was now empty.

Pleased with a good hour's work, he walked quickly, but not too quickly, through the streets to a bridge. Halfway across the bridge, with a swift motion, he tossed the box over the rail.

— KENNETH BULMER

— RICHARD WILSON

Tom Disch is a young American author whom you will soon be hearing much more about. He visited London recently and, the day before he left, we succeeded in extracting this manuscript from him. Here, in a tone of wry humour, is a jolly picture of our world in the centuries to come.

THREE POINTS ON THE DEMOGRAPHIC CURVE

by Thomas M. Disch

The Dispensing-robot ladled out a measure of nutrient into the child's bowl. It was programmed to say "Enjoy your food, dear one," to each of the children that filed past on the conveyor-belt. But its tape had worn thin and the sentiment emerged as a metallic snarl. The child, as he was shuttled slowly through the dining-hall by the conveyors ("the digestive tracks," a visitor had called them), sipped at the growth-inhibiting broth and listened appreciatively to the Dispenser's snarl. It was, for him, the very Pavlov-bell of digestion. A good sound.

Leaving the dining-hall, the child deposited his empty bowl into the Cupboard's extended hand. Restless with anticipation, he shifted his weight to his right leg. At last, the buzzer sounded—time for group callisthenics! None of the children understood the instructions that gabbled at them from the speakers, so they jogged about in place on the conveyor, each in his own fashion: flapping stiff arms

like vestigial, leaden wings, bending knees, craning necks, wiggling fingers and toes, not noticing their neighbour's kicks and bumps and knocks and pummels. They were young—no more than twelve years old—and youth can only be subdued gradually. Soon, soon, their wanderlust would come to an end and they would leave the Pasadena Statehome No. 46-C, ready to take their *permanent* place in society.

This, the first point of the demographic curve, is Earth in the year 2440. Population pressure stood at a then all-time high. Officials in a few government agencies predicted that, in another century, population pressure would be an insurmountable problem: there would be no place left to stand. Such gloomy forebodings were not taken seriously by the great mass of people. There had always been pessimists, it was observed. If more children were born, Science would find somewhere to put them. Science could work wonders.

There were still problems, of course. Challenges, frontiers. There was, for instance, the problem of the kidnappings. . . .

That problem, although it closely affected the fate of the children in Pasadena Statehome No. 46-C, was the professional concern of Darien Milkthirst, Investigator—Priority-A, Upper Levels. An important man. His private cubicle measured 4ft. x 4ft. x 4ft., rather extravagant for an adult of average stature like Darien, but, by the same principle, judges of an earlier age had worn robes of ermine. The dimensions of Darien's office were a symbol of the Power of the Law.

Darien Milkthirst worried, in a professional way, about the kidnappings, for there was little else that he could do. The kidnapper's identity, his method of operation, and his motives were unknown and unimaginable. Most puzzling of all: where had the kidnapper hidden the 56,470 children he had abducted? There was simply not, Darien assured himself, any room. Darien, you see, was one of those few officials who subscribed to the gloomy theories of Malthus. In this one instance, however, he was right; there was no room on Earth in the year 2440 to hide 56,470 kidnapped children.

"I don't see why you should worry so much, Darien

darling," his pretty little wife would chide at night when they were alone in the cosy cubicle. "The kidnapper hasn't even come *near* Pasadena. Shanghai, Stalingrad, Dublin—and that town in Chile, whadayacallit—but Pasadena? Never."

"There's no telling where he'll strike next. It could just as well be here as somewhere else."

"But you have guards at all the Statehomes, don't you? He won't get past the guards."

"There were guards at Dublin 12-E. The guards are still there, but four thousand children have vanished."

"Oh, now you've got *me* all upset," the little woman sniffled. "Do you think little Dorian is safe? And Myrtle? And Nora and Dulcie and Flo and Gretchen?" Dorian, Myrtle, Nora, Dulcie, Flo, and Gretchen were the offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Milkthirst. The six children still resided at Pasadena Statehome No. 46-C. Mrs. Milkthirst had wanted more children, but her husband believed in birth control.

"I don't know. Their danger is no greater than other children's." Darien worried in silence for a few minutes, then added: "What would a person want with so many children?"

"Children are nice," his wife returned sharply. "I'd like to have another baby *myself*. Shall we?"

But Darien had not been listening. "He must be insane."

"Shall we, hmm?"

The kidnapper, as though by appointment, appeared the next day at Pasadena Statehome No. 46-C during the twelve-year-olds' arithmetic lesson. He was, to judge by his sallow, wrinkled face, quite old, but his body was unstooped and his voice was not reedy with age. There were, to be sure, hints of the cosmetic art: a flash of chromium beneath the enamel of his teeth, a smoothness of the skin that suggested plastic. Yet, however altered by surgery, he was surely human.

Young Dorian Milkthirst would not have interrupted his study of the calculus to notice these subtle aspects of the visitor's person. Such nuances are probably of interest only to the more mature. But Dorian did find it remarkable that this man had appeared before the class in a manner unlike

that employed by any past visitor to the Statehome. He was suspended in an orange bubble of air four feet above their heads. And, most remarkably, *he was six feet tall!*

"My dear littles," the kidnapper said in perfect French, "I have come to liberate you. I will take you to a better land and there you will be free. Now—you must be very quiet and climb up this rope ladder one-by-one. There is room in Fairieland for all of you. Quietly!"

The kidnapper threw down the rope ladder, but the children did nothing. They had not understood the kind words of their would-be abductor, nor did they recognize the purpose of the ladder, since climbing was not a part of their gymnastic regimen. One or two began to cry softly.

"Stupid!" the old man screamed at them—again, in French. "What have you a fear of? Look how safe it is: it holds *me*." He climbed down the rope ladder and stood in the swarm of gaping children, a sequoia among cherry trees. Blat! And an excellent target.

The temporarily paralysed body of the kidnapper was carried by a cordon of jubilant guards to the office of Investigator Milkthirst. Since the criminal had frozen into a standing position, there was no way to fit all of him into the Investigator's cubicle.

Darien's first thoughts as he gazed at his prisoner were not unlike those of his son. He had never seen a giant. He was amazed that a creature of such bulk should still be proportioned as a man, in violation of the laws of biology, not to mention common sense.

"Oof," the giant said groggily, thereby revealing to the acute Investigator that he could speak English.

"You are under arrest," Darien informed the kidnapper.

"Oh! You speak *English*. I knew something had gone wrong."

"Who are you?" Darien demanded in a stern soprano voice. "What do you want? Where have you taken the children?"

"I," said the kidnapper, "am Prosper Ashfield. I am the Last Man on Earth."

Darien expressed his doubt.

"Let me explain. I have come to you from a far distant future, from an Earth sterilized by war and slowly re-fruitified by nature—and by my robots. I am the last of

that war's survivors—preserved by artificial means for many centuries, so that I may . . ." He began to choke on his tears. "I am the last cold season of Man's continuity. But to what avail?"

"To what avail?" Dorian asked courteously.

"To *none*, unless you help me."

Darien observed that, although the laws that bound the Last Man on Earth were probably quite permissive, the law that a Priority-A Investigator was sworn to follow did not allow him to help kidnappers.

Prosper's lips curled in a warm, chromium smile. "But I, in return, will help you. The problem of your age—over-population—is the very opposite of my own. What are a few thousand, more or less, to you? But to my own age, they are the difference between life and death."

"You have a point."

"And then, think what it will mean to the children. Earth will be theirs: its fertile expanses, its mountain heights and sea-depths, its future. Without them, there will be no future. Let me transport them to that future in my time machine—or count yourself the murderer of the human race."

If there was a precedent for Darien's dilemma, he could not remember it. At last, he consented to Prosper's entreaties and accompanied him back to his time machine, where the old man made a small adjustment in the spacial co-ordinates. At supper hour, the entire student body of Pasadena Statehome No. 46-C was shunted into the rosy future by the dining-hall conveyor-belt, like briquets of coal being fed into the belly of a furnace.

Darien watched them depart wistfully: Dorian, Myrtle, Nora, Dulcie, Flo. . . . Three thousand, four-and-a-half, seven thousand. There were enough to form a nice little city-state now, a New Pasadena. He imagined his son, standing proud and tall (four feet, maybe) on the crest of the windswept hill, watching the sun rise over the distant horizon.

"Maybe next week," Darien suggested, "you can pick up another batch. As long as the co-ordinates are set."

. . . and Gretchen. Darien waved to his youngest, but she was preoccupied with the orange bubble she was approaching and into which she disappeared.

Twelve-year-old Dorian Milkthirst looked at the distant horizon fearfully. The sun was setting and a cold wind blew across the hill unto which he and the other 7,500 children had been deposited by the time machine. In the controlled environment of the Statehome, there had been no need for clothing: he shivered.

Prosper Ashfield popped out of the orange bubble behind the last of the children. He snorted with contempt. "You are pioneers!" he bellowed at the children huddled in bevies of warmth. "Behave like pioneers. A world lies before you—what will you make of it?"

"I wanna go home," little Gretchen bawled.

"I'm hungry," Flo complained.

Dulcie sneezed.

"There's no conveyor," Nora said in stricken tones.

"I have to go-go. I want Nurse," Myrtle whispered.

"It's dark!" Dorian concluded. "Where is the roof? Are the lights burnt out?"

"That's the sky above you," Prosper explained. "The lights in the sky are stars."

"They're burnt out," Dorian maintained bravely.

Dulcie sneezed again.

Prosper signalled to his chief robot to lead the children to the shelter, but the children had never learned to walk, not in the locomotive sense of that word. Vigorously and with the best intentions, they trod ground for fifteen minutes, the length of their gymnastic period, and stopped, out of breath. Prosper and his robots carried the children into the building where they zipped them into flannel pyjamas and put them to bed. None of the children could sleep since the building was not equipped with a Slumber-tone.

Dulcie was one of the last to be brought in. She caught a cold, languished for three days, and died.

"I told you this bunch would turn out just like the last," Prosper's chief robot grumbled.

"If they do, it will be your fault. You have vaccinated all of them, haven't you?"

"Yes, and if I hum E-sharp two octaves below middle-C, they'll fall asleep. They've started eating, too. I had a hard time convincing them that the food wouldn't make them grow up to look like me." He waved a radar antenna mirthfully.

"Well then, what's wrong?"

"Oh . . . they're stupid. They've got no survival value."

"They're human beings. Don't forget it was a human being who made you. Or made the machine that made you."

The robot blinked. "Not a *stupid* human being."

"They're only children. Give them time. They need to be re-educated."

"Yes, master."

"That's the spirit." Watching the robot depart, Prosper smiled. Servants, he thought, were all alike. They resented newcomers.

Prosper Ashfield was not a happy man.

As a youth, he had dreamed, as almost every young man dreams, of being the Last Man on Earth. Unlike other young men, Prosper had the good fortune to realize this ambition. For years, he lived the life of a Roman emperor, not a decadent Roman emperor, of course. Certain pleasures, by their very nature, could never be enjoyed by the Last Man. But, generally, it was a carefree, luxurious time. Legions of robots carried on the work of reconstruction while Prosper hibernated in a deep freeze, emerging every decade or so for a tour of inspection or a holiday at his latest palace. He skied in the Alps, played solitaire at New Versailles, dived beneath the waters of the Great Barrier Reef, and sat through days and nights of old movies at his private theatre in Bismarck, North Dakota. Bismarck was headquarters.

Eventually, as the centuries unfolded, Prosper tired of these easy pleasures. He realized that, despite the best the robots could do, the time would come when the noble race of man would pass away, unless he found some way to renew it. Already he was past the prime of life; his method would have to be indirect. Accordingly, the robots were commissioned to construct a time machine and Prosper retired to his deep freeze beneath the subways of Bismarck.

Much to his surprise, the robots succeeded, and the days of Prosper's happiness were at an end.

After one year of re-education, the children showed little of the pioneering spirit that Prosper had hoped to see in them. They could walk—if coerced—for twenty consecutive minutes; their diet had produced, in some cases, an inch or two of vertical growth and 7,999 little pot bellies. They were not afraid of the night when they were in a lighted room, and, although their gregarious instincts were still strong, there had been few recent cases of catatonia among individuals isolated from their herd. In these ways, the children had adjusted.

There was also a darker side of the picture.

The children liked the robots, who were of a better quality than those provided by the Statehome, and Prosper's robots had come to reciprocate this affection. Prosper, alone, regarded this development with alarm. The children treated the robots as their natural superiors; the robots always acquiesced to human judgement. Would man become a pet vegetable in a world of automatons? Yes, Prosper reasoned. No, he insisted.

"Why don't you go out and play like other little boys? Go swimming. Ride a bicycle," Prosper demanded one day of Dorian.

"What other little boys do that?"

"Use your own initiative, then. Be a leader."

"But I can't swim or ride a bicycle."

"Then play. Do something, for God's sake."

"I am playing." Dorian began to cry in frustration. He was playing chess with CB-80, a defective robot, who sometimes lost at complicated games.

III

In the meantime—subjectively—Priority-A Investigator Milkthirst had been demoted to a Priority-B Investigator. The new apartment in the Lower Levels that the Milkthirsts shared with another couple was smaller but adequate. Prosper, on his return had some difficulty locating his old friend. The Pasadenans of whom he inquired his way were xenophobes to the man. At length, since Prosper was

unable to make his way even on hands and knees through the tunnels of the Lower Levels, Darien was conveyed to him.

"You shouldn't have come to me," Darien said, somewhat inaccurately. "People will begin to think and that's always a bad thing. Take some more children—and God-speed." The Priority-B Investigator had been waiting anxiously for a second kidnapping to occur, not, it must be said, for the purest motives.

"I don't want any more children. In fact, I hoped to return the first ones. It hasn't worked out."

"It can't be done. The Statehome has already been re-filled, and there's no room for unscheduled arrivals. The birth rate, you know."

"But . . . only one of your weeks has gone by!"

Darien nodded sadly. "Malthus . . ." he could be heard to mumble. Then, more briskly, "Has something really gone wrong?"

Prosper gave an account of the children's inadequacy as pioneers.

"I might have known," Darien said. "Their early conditioning in the Statehomes is very strict. Perhaps if you went to the Incubators . . ."

"No. I've resigned as the saviour and nursemaid of the human race. My only wish is to be the Last Man once more—to know that mankind can expire with dignity. I am disillusioned."

This attitude was not so foreign to the Investigator's experience that he could pretend to righteous indignation. "Perhaps an earlier age, then?" he suggested. "I'm sorry that we can't help you here. As I said there's simply no room."

Prosper brightened. "Of course! I'll sell them!"

Abdul Hassan ibn Fez kicked young Dorian Milkthirst face-first into the oasis' mud. He spat.

"This . . . this goat's pizzle you sell as a slave? What can I do with such worthless things? I am a business man. I would be laughed at if I brought this. . . ." He kicked Dorian once more. ". . . this bag of water to the market."

"They *are* very white," Prosper pointed out hopefully.

"So? It's a buyer's market for whites. Even the girls are not good, too little."

"I'm not asking very much for them."

In reply, Abdul Hassan ibn Fez spat in young Dorian's face as the boy raised himself from the mud.

And so, Prosper's role in the Children's Crusade had come to nothing. There were still many other ages to try. Slavery in one form or another had always been popular. One by one, the Hebrews, the Greeks, the Romans, Saxon kings, and Russian Czars turned Prosper and his band of 6,000 (there had been unavoidable losses) pot-bellied ragamuffins away from their doors. The Spanish court bought a dozen, Gretchen among them, but elsewhere and elsewhen, the children were not thought to be acceptable dwarfs. As the Borgia woman had pointed out to Prosper: "Dwarfs should be funny, and these are so sad. I cry."

Then, when Prosper had thought all the resources of history had been exhausted, he met Elijah Grasp, the Edinburgh industrialist.

"Admirable, admirable." Elijah patted Dorian's bared head. "So very utilitarian, to coin a phrase. They're just the right size, and you say they understand machinery?"

"They *love* machinery," Prosper asserted.

"Six thousand! How did you do it?"

"They're orphans."

"That's no reason for them to be idle, though. I think I can find a place for them in my establishments. Mr. Ashfield. We'll turn them into good little citizens, eh?"

"You have removed a great burden from my mind. You will take them?"

"Indeed, sir! Who could resist these poor unfortunates? What is their religion, by the way?"

"Presbyterian, I believe."

Tears of happiness welled from Elijah Grasp's eyes. He was a Presbyterian himself, as Prosper had cunningly discovered.

The children were shackled into place that afternoon at the industrialist's cotton mill (those that were not sent off to his coal mines), where they were instructed in the loading of the spindles and the care of the shuttles. White-faced and watery-eyed, Little Dorian gazed up at the great machines reverently. He had found a home.

This, the second point on the demographic curve, is the year 1790, toward the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The acceleration of the population growth-rate that dates from these years has been the wonder of demographers of all succeeding ages.

Prosper, returning to his own era, allowed fifty years to elapse since his departure. The robots had been planning a special surprise for him, which took that long to complete. Their gift was not exactly what Prosper would have asked for, but the robots had meant well.

It was an ideal city. They had designed it themselves. The influence of the children was evident: the city was a replica of Pasadena. The robot-in-chief spent a full day declaiming on the rationality of the city, its beauty, and its economy of space and materials. When he had finished, Prosper announced that he had a new task for the robots. He instructed them to let him remain in the deep-freeze until they had completed their work.

"Reversc entropy, hah!" were Prosper's last words before being quick-frozen.

This is the third point on the demographic curve, and it may well be thought a low point. The year? Calendars mean nothing. The earth rotates more slowly on its axis now: it circles the sun in a greater ellipse. It is very cold, but the robots are still at work.

— THOMAS M. DISCH

Witches, like the rest of us, have their little problems. But few so peculiar as the troubles that afflict the Thompson household!



THE FAMILIAR

by Keith Roberts

Anita's heels skidded and she shot down an earth bank that was like a mud slide. She landed at the bottom with an immense splash, shook herself, spat, and sat up half blinded by rain. Her Granny's '*shower o' shavins'* had developed into a cloudburst. Ahead of Anita the Appearance was still visible, capering along like a silver bubble. She scrambled up and rushed in pursuit.

At first the pouring water had been a huge discomfort but now she was completely soaked she was enjoying it. It was fun, almost like swimming. She took a gate with a huge leap and pounded up across the meadow on the other side. The rain was like a grey curtain blotting out every-

thing but the nearest objects; the hiss and drum of the spots was all there was. Anita would have stopped and done something silly like taking all her clothes off but there was no time. On top of the ridge she stopped and flung her head about, laughing at the water that flew out of her hair. Then she ran on again, still following the bubble.

The thing curved away, trying to reach the cover of a thickly overgrown hedge. Anita sprinted and just managed to head it off. It jinked down the slope toward the Fyne-brook.

"Got you. . . ."

Anita launched herself full-length, and missed by inches. The bubble spat with rage and turned uphill again. Anita said something unladylike. She was rapidly running out of breath; she made a final effort and managed to herd the Appearance back down to the side of the brook, where it promptly climbed a tree.

Anita wriggled cautiously along a branch, hoping the bubble would not take it into its head to leap for safety. It didn't; instead it retreated, growling ominously, to the swaying tip of its refuge. Anita paused glaring, her chest still heaving rapidly. Beneath her the Fyne-brook, already swollen by the deluge, churned along swiftly, its surface a rich yellow-brown. The rain roared into it; except for Anita's hard breathing there was no other sound. She crouched with the spots banging on her shoulders and waited. At least she had the thing now; there was no escape. . . .

The bubble seemed to tense; then it sprang forward in an attempt to run over her back to freedom. Anita grabbed desperately, sensing her last chance slipping away. Her fingers gripped wet fur; she screamed with triumph, there was a crack, a falling sensation, a mighty splash. . . .

They reached the bank in a smother of laughter and bad language. Laughter from Anita, bad language from the bubble. Anita struggled out of the brook, by now almost deliriously pleased with the state she was in. "Just *look* at me, I can't get any filthier . . . an' you can't get away." The thing she was holding growled again then burst into a series of spitting screams. Anita started to run along the bank, holding the ball of rage as far away from her as she could. "If only I knew which bit I'd got. . . . I think

it's his tail otherwise he'd have had me by now. . . . I *hope* it's his tail. . . . I'm still all right, it *must* be his tail. . . .” She detoured round a clump of hawthorn, skidded again and sat in another puddle. It really was becoming too funny for words. . . . Then across the ford (jumping in between all the stepping-stones) and through the meadow to home. She scurried up the path to the back door of the cottage, calling as she went.

“Gran. . . .”

“*Gran*. . . !”

Mowwoooowww . . . pshaaahh. . . .

“GRAN!”

The door snapped open ; the old lady peered out and her jaw sagged. “*You* . . . by Im wot's Down Under, wot in 'Ell 'ave yer bin at. . . .”

“Get a box, Gran, I've got him. . . .”

“*Wot?*” Then, “Lor-a-daisy, it's *'im*. . . .”

“Hurry up and get a box Gran. . . . Please, I'm getting wet. . . .”

Granny Thompson gobbled faintly, recovered herself and tottered inside. Anita heard her dragging something heavy from under the stairs. Round her the rain still hissed ; she was beginning to dance with impatience.

Granny reappeared lugging a tea chest. “ 'Ere, this'll atter do. . . . Tek it *steady* then. . . . Wot bit ayya got 'olt on?”

“His tail. . . .”

“Yer'll 'ave ter git 'im further *up* then . . . if 'e touches that box 'e'll scraunch round an' 'ave yer. . . .”

Psssshhhh. . . .

“Look out then Gran . . . get out, you're in the way. . . .”

“Om gotta git the *lid* orf, ent I. . . .”

“Well hurry up, he'll get me in a minute. . . . Yow, you little swine. . . .”

He had ‘got’ her.

“Well 'old 'im further up like I *tole* yer . . . git 'is neckit. . . .”

“If you're so damn smart you do it. . . .”

“Not me,” cackled the old lady. “Yore done orlright so far. . . .”

“Ow you little. . . .”

“*Old* 'im, dun't let 'im git orf *now*. . . .”

“Well how do you think I . . . YOWWW. . . .”

PSSSSTTTZZZZ . . .

Clunk.

The lid was down; scrapings and snarls sounded from inside. Anita staggered into the cottage and leaned against a wall gasping. The object of the manoeuvre might be invisible but the marks of his displeasure most certainly were not. Anita examined her chewed thumb mournfully; a large spot of blood dropped off and splashed on the floor. She panted "It was the rain, you could see it bouncing off him. I saw him going across the garden. . . ."

"Well git out o' my kitchen, stand there *jawin'* . . . Look at orl that muck. . . ."

Anita giggled, lifted the front of her jumper insolently and squeezed it. More water pattered down to join the spreading pool round her feet. "We both fell in the Fync-brook. . . ."

Granny Thompson seized the housebrush. "Out, *out*. . . ."

"But Gran I've got to change, take all these wet things off. . . ."

"Well tek 'em orf in the yard. 'Ent 'avin' yer traipsin' through like *that*. . . ."

"Gran, I can't do that!" Anita was propelled back outside, protesting.

"Use the coal 'ole then," roared her Granny. "Fust time I noo yer were that *pertikler*. . . ." An old dress came flying through the door. Anita fielded it just before it fell into the mud.

* * *

The two witches sat a little mournfully, regarding the tea chest that was placed on the table between them. "The 'ole trouble *is*," said Granny, "We're almost back weer we started. . . . We're got 'im orlright, but we kent let 'im *out*. . . ."

"Well we shall have to do something," said Anita, pouting. The tea chest sneezed. "Oh look there, he's gone and caught cold. . . ." She patted the box consolingly. It swore at her. "I don't know why you had to spell him up like that. It wouldn't have been so bad if it had been reversible. . . ."

"I done it 'cos of Aggie Everett," snarled Granny. "Om lorst too many familiars orlready on 'er account. . . ."

Snoopin' an' sniffin' round, she en't ever *satisfied*. 'Er place must be a-bulgin' with 'em, an' orl *Thompson trained*. So I ses ter this one, right me lad I ses, Grade Two fer you then we'll see wot we kent fix *up* for yer. Invisible I ses, so she kent git a look at yer; an' impervious ter radar, so she kent git 'olt on yer that way . . . an' non-reversin', so if she *does* git yer she kent change yer *back*. That'll fox 'er, I ses. . . ."

"Well you might have tried it out on something else first. . . ."

"Didn't think to," confessed the elder Thompson. "Never entered me *'ead*. . . . As fer 'im turnin' into a *sneak thief*, well oo'd a' thort 'e 'ad it *in 'im*. . . ."

"All cats are sneak thievers, it's in their nature. And when he found out he could get away with it. . . ."

"It wadn't jist the thievin'," moaned Granny. "It were 'is *pranks*. . . . 'Owlin' an' gooin' on an' slummockin' acrost between me feet orl the while. . . . I nearly *went* four times, yisdey. An' then this mornin', little varmint . . . sittin' atop them brussels. I picks the cullingder orf the sink, Maude, I ses ter meself, they're mortal 'eavy fer brussels . . . an' there 'e must a' bin sittin' atop on 'em. *Whoosh*, 'e come up. Flew straight uvver me *'ead*. I spins round o' course, flummoxed . . . brussels evrywheer . . . an' the batter, that went orl of a tip down uvver the lot. . . . Om mortal glad you *saw 'im*," said Granny. "I couldn't a' stood much more on it I'll tell yer. . . ."

The box mewed dismally.

Anita leaped up and cooed over it. "Poor ickle thing, he must be *starved*. . . . Is 'oo *starved*, den? There. . . ." There was an airhole in the tea chest; she tickled around inside it with her finger, then snatched it back hastily as something lashed against the wood. "I'm going to fetch him some food and milk. Poor little thing, he must be simply *dying*. . . ." She stared hard at her Granny and swept into the kitchen like a combination of Florence Nightingale and Saint Francis of Assisi. She came back with a plate and jug in her hands, set them down and started fiddling with the lid of the box. Granny Thompson rose hastily. "'Ere, wot yer a-dooin'?"

"I can't feed him without taking him out. There, mother's coming. . . ."

"An' oom a-gooin'," said Granny, heading for the stairs. "Yer gret sorft 'a'porth. . . . Jist yer gi' me time ter git *undone*, an' the snib acrrost the bedroom door, then yer kin do wot yer like. . . ."

"Well how am I too feed him, if I don't open the box? And he must want to do his little jobs by now."

"If I know 'im," foamed Granny, "'e's *done* 'is little jobs by now. Bein' shut away wouldn't stop the likes of 'im. . . . Gret square-eaded brute, no sense o' *decency*. I should a' knowed better, orl 'e needed were the *charnst*. . . ."
She pointed at Anita's hands. One slim thumb was already bulky with bandages; underneath, herbs were working like fury. "Look at that," snarled the old lady. "If yer wants another ter *match*, yer a-gooin' the right way ter *git* it. . . ."
Anita hesitated then sighed. She sat down and began to poke little bits of meat through the blowhole of the box.

The night was far from peaceful. From eleven, when Anita retired, there were periodic concussions and flares of light as spell after spell bounced off the tea chest. At three the uproar stopped and was succeeded by easily the most appalling stench ever to assault a girl's nostrils. Anita threshed about, winding blankets round her face; her Granny had evidently progressed to the field of organic chemistry. At four the cat started wailing with frustration; at five, Granny Thomson started wailing with frustration. At six Anita gave it all up and went out to swim in Top Canal until breakfast. At seven, when she returned, the chest stood outside the kitchen door, slightly scorched but otherwise unharmed. Its occupant was still very evidently un-reversed; from inside it came sounds suggestive of an army of little men destroying a calico factory. Anita put her hand to her forehead, and passed in to breakfast. . . .

Her Granny worked till two in the afternoon, but her heart was no longer in it; her efforts were feeble to say the least, Anita could have done better with one hand behind her back. She knew it was no good trying though; non-reversing spells are proof against virtually anything.

At two-thirty Granny Thompson decided to make one of her rare trips into town; there were certain medicaments she needed before the battle was recommenced. Anita saw her off gratefully to the bus and began to make her own preparations. She laid out the materials she would need,

arranging them in rows by the kitchen sink. Later on she would have little or no time to look for things. . . . She went round the cottage closing all windows and doors and blocking the fireplaces with blankets. Then she hefted the box into the kitchen. She donned a heavy coat, a second pair of jeans, wellington boots and gardening gloves. She sighed, and started undoing the fastenings of the chest. "I'm sorry about this, Vortigern," she said softly. "But it's for your own good. . . ."

She flung up the lid.

* * *

Granny Thompson tramped back across the field at just after four. The sun was bright and she was loaded with shopping. She was looking forward to a mashing of tea and a nice cool sit down; the bus had made her feel very hot and fretful. "Queasy gret things," muttered Granny, transferring the adjective according to her own peculiar custom. "Queasy, orl on 'em. . . ." The cottage came into sight, small and neat, doors and windows tranquilly ajar. "It's summat not t'ave that there gret cat chargin' orl uvver," she soliloquised. "I'll 'ave 'im wi' these." She patted the bottle whose tops protruded from her basket. Visits to establishments as far removed as chemists and ironmongers had yielded some startling compounds. "Settle 'im down," muttered the old lady. "Direckly after tea. . . ." She pushed open the gate and hobbled up the path.

Granny Thompson's shriek of fear and horror woke Anita readily enough. She'd been half expecting it anyway. She swung her legs off the settee, where she had been resting to recover from the afternoon's exertions, and trotted into the kitchen. Granny was reeling about dramatically, hand clapped to her forehead. A trail of dropped groceries and smashed bottles led from the garden gate. Anita said "Gran . . ." and swooped a chair under the old lady just in time. Granny Thompson lay back, breathing stertorously and fanning herself with one thin brown hand. "Salts, gel . . . salts. . . ."

"Don't be silly Gran, you're all right now. . . ."

"Salts," bellowed the old lady with startling violence. "I kin feel meself a-gooin'. . . ." She grabbed the green bottle from Anita, wrenched out the stopper and sniffed

shudderingly. "Ar, that's better . . . fer a minute I thort I saw—aaaahhh!"

A weird face peered round the doorframe. It was a smouldering pink with the exception of one ear, which was a sharp sky blue. The rest of the creature moved stiffly into sight; it had the shape of an enormous and rather overweight cat, but the colours belonged to nothing living. Sunset hues ran over its body in streaks and blobs; near the rump they blended into an obnoxious violet. The tail twitched slightly; the apparition opened its mouth.

Pshawwww . . . fffffttzzzz. . . .

Granny Thompson, who had been staring glassy-eyed, jerked convulsively. Bottle and stopper flew out of her hands; the former jangled noisily across the floor, the latter burst with a considerable report. The thing in the doorway swore again.

"Gran don't be silly, look what you've done. . . . It's all right, it's only Vortigern. . . . *Gran*. . . ."

The old lady was evincing a desire to climb onto her grand-daughter's shoulders. "'Aunted gel, 'aunted. . . . I keep thinkin' I see—*wot* were that?"

"I said it was Vortigern. . . . I've done it, Gran, he's visible now, he won't be able to play any more trieks. And you've still got him for a familiar, the way you were going on you'd have blown him up or something. . . ."

Granny said "Eh?" She edged forward to the door. Vortigern regarded her with Technicoloured disgust. Granny Thompson started to chuckle. "Look at 'im . . . done up a treat, en't 'e . . . served out, 'e is . . . an' Aggie Everett, I kin jist see 'er face. . . . I'll send 'im uvver, soon as 'e's bin made up. . . . She wont git uvver it fer months. . ." She subsided on the chair again, this time to cackle.

Vortigern watched her stolidly. It was impossible to tell exactly what expression his eyes held, for they had remained invisible; but it was easy to guess. His tail developed three separate kinks of contempt; he spat once more, turned and stalked off. As he walked he banged his feet down so that they sounded like little soft cushions hitting the ground. All cats stamp when annoyed; but *dyed* cats stamp worst of all. . . .

HELL REVISITED an interview with KINGSLEY AMIS

It has been over six years since Kingsley Amis' critique, *NEW MAPS OF HELL*, descended upon the little world of science fiction, an alien visitor from the outer reaches of Literature. The visit was received with reactions as various as one might fairly expect from readers and writers of science fiction when confronted with a bona fide alien. Amis was blessed, he was cursed, but he was never ignored. Though of much briefer compass, one can be fairly sure that the interview that follows will cause almost as many tempers to soar or smiles to glimmer as *The Book* itself.

The editor of this magazine and the interviewer found Mr. Amis taking the sun in the garden of his London home. He was wearing a nubby summer jacket of midnight blue, a checkered shirt, and a salmon-coloured tie. It was agreed that a pub would be a much more appropriate place for an interview, and so a pub was sought. Eventually it was found—not, apparently, in the place Mr. Amis had left it last. Mr. Amis had gin with pink, easy on the pink. The editor set his little Japanese tape recorder spinning. Mr. Amis spoke . . .

Midway through the interview the tape had to be reversed, and it was discovered after the interview (and another gin with pink, easy on the pink) that the little

Japanese tape recorder had picked up nothing of the second half of the interview. After a few general remarks on the subjects of Japan and microminiaturization (and the price we pay for it), the interviewer returned with Mr. Amis to his home, where Mr. Amis replicated with remarkable fidelity what he'd said before.

Anyone who might take offence at Mr. Amis' remarks should first consider the little Japanese tape recorder, which showed a decided preference, especially in the pub, to record other things than the interview. The interviewer, transcribing the tape, had to rely on memory and context to fill in the moments of fiercest static. It is possibly at exactly these moments that Mr. Amis was most acerbic.

Amis:

I've been taking a sort of holiday from science fiction. Perhaps I've just been too lazy to have kept up with it. Anyway for the last year or two I haven't really kept up with what's coming out. Now this may be very blame-worthy on my part; it may also be something to do with the failure of science fiction in general to measure up to what I required of it several years ago in **NEW MAPS OF HELL** and elsewhere.

Such reading as I have done hasn't been very encouraging, hasn't made me want to do very much more. For example, Brian Aldiss's *The Saliva Tree*, his recent novella, I suppose one would call it. This, I thought, was a very interesting piece as far as the idea goes. In two ways at least it was very well worked out: the presence of H. G. Wells as a character kept resolutely off-stage so that the story closes just as he is about to appear, and the way in which the plots of several Wells stories—**THE FOOD OF THE GODS**, **THE INVISIBLE MAN**, and **THE WAR OF THE WORLDS**—have been worked into it. Aldiss never exploited that, and unless one is watching carefully one would miss these references. I liked the self-restraint which made him do that. *But*—a lack of finish is what I'm complaining about. This is not mere verbal pedantry. In that story Aldiss had a wonderful opportunity to recreate the Edwardian world, in which strange things, recognizable as science-fictional things, happen. What spoiled the story—or stopped it being as good as it could have been—was the half-hearted way in which the Vic-

toriana were employed, the quarter-hearted way in which the dialogue was written. One isn't asking for Victorian idioms in every line, but there were too many modernisms —so that I thought this was a great opportunity that had been missed, and I connect this with the fact that, like every other science fiction writer, Aldiss has to keep on turning the stuff out. But I wonder whether this hasn't become something of a habit of some science fiction writers, who are accustomed to not finishing their stories off, to not giving them that final revision which might upgrade them twenty or forty per cent.

Two other writers have disappointed me, writers for whom I had high hopes at one time. I admit that I've been somewhat out of touch, but I've seen nothing by Algys Budrys, who I hoped was going to go on in the vein of that to-my-mind masterly novel, *ROGUE MOON*. What I've seen by Budrys since then has been a regression to a point well below that.

And then J. G. Ballard—the science-fiction Conrad of his generation. I admired *THE DROWNED WORLD* and *THE CRYSTAL WORLD*, though I didn't think too much of *THE DROUGHT*. That curious and individual landscape that Ballard occupies and writes about came through very well at least twice out of three times. But his latest work—his stories "The Assassination Weapon" and "You: Comma: Marilyn Monroe"—I can't follow these. Let me go on record as saying that I'm too stupid to understand what they're about. I cannot make any contact with them at all. I happen to know that Jim Ballard is a devotee of William Burroughs, and this comes through far too strongly. I don't mean to disparage Burroughs as a writer. I enjoyed *NAKED LUNCH* far more than I thought I was going to. I thought it was very funny, a fact which most of the critics left out of account. But I do think this is a disastrous influence. It may be that Ballard will eventually make something of it, but at the moment it sits very heavily upon him. Perhaps it's the curse of ambitious science fiction that it goes outside the field of science fiction altogether and becomes something pretentious, fantastic, and certainly obscure.

Whereas run-of-the-mill science fiction is even more run-of-the-mill than it used to be. There's a new writer called

D. F. Jones, who is bringing out a new novel called *Colossus*. Well, the Colossus of course is a vast electronic brain which takes over some of the functions of the President of the United States, including war decisions. When it's activated it finds that a similar machine is being operated in Russia. This is *all* that has happened up to page 50. Jones takes *nothing* for granted: it's as though he were writing the first science fiction novel rather than the ten-thousand-and-first. This is rather depressing, because notions about electronic brains and such are well known now to the general reading public, not just to the hard-core science fiction audience. So it looks as if on this level too there is a lamentable lack of enterprise.

Interviewer: In NEW MAPS OF HELL you singled out five authors whom you especially admired: Pohl, Bradbury, Sheckley, Clarke, and Blish. What is your opinions of these writers' subsequent publications?

Amis:

Pohl has been one of the big disappointments of my life. No sooner had I given him the accolade of being the best science fiction writer current in about 1960 than he promptly fell off and I've seen nothing by him since that justifies the praise I gave him in my book.

Bradbury's gone in the direction one might have expected him to go, and has become completely drowned in whimsicality and fantasy. *SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES* was the worst novel, I can safely say, that I've come across for five or ten years, and that's saying something.

Sheckley, the wit of whose early stories I enjoyed so much, seems unfortunately committed to repeating himself on a lower level of energy, and in a style devoid of that earlier wit.

Clarke seems to have been jogging along the well-worn tracks that he mapped out ten years ago and seems to have devoted a lot of his attention to the science-fact field, which is enjoyable enough. However I believe that he intends to return to science fiction soon, and one can't help looking forward to that with eager expectation.

James Blish has concentrated too much of his attention on juveniles. I enjoyed *THE NIGHT SHAPES* all right,

though I found it rather difficult to make out what was going on—I didn't get the point—and I've heard now from an authoritative source that it was meant to be a parody. I can't imagine how any person with a sense of fun could have found it to be that—though I quite enjoyed it as I say.

Interviewer: A few writers have appeared on the SF scene since NEW MAPS, or come into greater prominence. What is your opinion of such of these writers as you've been able to get around to? (A number of names were suggested at this point; two elicited comment).

Amis:

Kurt Vonnegut's all right, though he seems to be getting a bit cute and impish for my taste. I'm sorry to sound like a wizened Tory, a reactionary dreamer about the glories of the past, but for me he hasn't done anything that comes up to his early novel *PLAYER PIANO*. *CAT'S CRADLE* had some good ideas in it but it wasn't science fiction enough for me, and I thought that the multiplicity of chapters and chapter titles interfered very much with the flow of the story.

Anthony Burgess is a splendid writer in the ordinary mainstream of fiction who has taken a couple of excursions into science fiction. I enjoyed *THE WANTING SEED* and *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* enormously. He is an example of what I've wanted to see for a long time—the serious writer, let's say, who does make occasional forays into science fiction. At the moment he is off this and venturing into espionage fiction, but he may come back and I hope he does, because he's a stylist and that's rare in this field.

Interviewer: One of your chief concerns in NEW MAPS OF HELL seemed to be to make a case for SF's respectability. Do you feel that that battle is any nearer to having been won?

Amis:

The battle for science fiction's respectability has been half won. As regards the external acceptance of science fiction by the general reading public, I think that has happened. All over the place, science fiction is reviewed quite as seriously as other kinds of books, and if I've had anything to do with that I'm thankful to think so.

But the other half of the battle—the *internal* respectabilities, one might call it—has not yet been won. I keep talking about style, and I know that science fiction writers are a little bit impatient and contemptuous about this idea, I think very much at their peril. Style is more than a matter of semicolons and so on. Too many science fiction novels read as if they were—they probably *are*—a hastily typed-out draft, straight onto the typewriter, and gone through half-heartedly to correct repetitions of words and so on. This is depressing.

I know there's a great pressure on science fiction writers to produce, and produce and produce. But some of those writers who have made reputations and are reasonably secure would be well-advised to turn out four books where before they'd turned out five and give the essential elements of verbal finish to their work.

Carelessness, indifference, complacence, or apathy about stylistic questions is very well demonstrated by an appalling fact that I learned from an equally authoritative source recently: that when that very gallant, valuable and always interesting critical journal, *Science Fiction Horizons*, was offered to members of Science Fiction Writers of America at special rates and under a simple arrangement, out of a membership of a hundred and fifty or thereabouts *three* writers thought it was worth the trouble of sending in a dollar to find out what was being said about their craft.

I don't say that reading criticism of one's field of writing makes one a better writer, but I *do* say that lack of concern with any of these problems is an absolutely disastrous bar to acquiring real decent literary conscience, a habit of self-criticism. I think it's this above all that science fiction writers need.

—KINGSLEY AMIS

Interviewer: Thomas M. Disch

*Holt Mannering was prepared to pay for his kicks.
An entertaining story of a near and possible future.*

THE REAL THING

by Eric C. Williams

"Interplanetary Jumpoff" is held in a tricky orbit between Earth and Moon so that a line drawn from the centre of the Moon to the centre of the Earth passes through IJ (give or take a mile or two, according to the state of payload and position of the Sun-Moon-Earth trinity).

IJ is a vast platform holding hotels, offices and workshops. It is placed where it is so that interplanetary proton-cruisers can build up a high initial velocity by falling round the Moon and flinging off towards whatever part of the heavens Mars or Venus will be occupying at the end of their six-month cruise. "Fling off" is calculated to the split second and if missed cannot be repeated until the next lunation. Accordingly, passengers are ferried from Earth several days before the calculated moment of launching so that all documentary difficulties can be settled in good time, luggage stowed and weak space stomachs dealt with. Passengers sometimes have whole days to while away, and plenty of entertainment is provided to keep their minds off the infinite hole on which they float. First timers generally prefer to watch the rotating Earth or the motionless Moon; old timers watch films or eat or drink or gamble. The two-three timers not wishing to appear tyros and having renewed their memories of Earth by a half hour at the telescopes, look around for something more memorable than drinking or filmgoing. They find Smith & Thackeray advertised on menus and notice boards. Smith and Thackeray offer a flight round the Moon in a fully authentic reproduction turn-of-the-millennium-style rocket ship complete with

simulated hazards. Departures every three hours. Parties assemble at Room 1002, Moon side. Nothing is printed about fare. That is one of the hazards.

Pergold Smith looked up under the gold corded peak of his cap towards the closed office door and allowed the eagle glint to fade from his eyes and his jaw to uncramp from its rock-like hardness. He rubbed his young face into more comfortable lines.

"We can relax for this work period," he commented to John Thackeray, who, garbed in oilstained space knitwear, was still acting his part of the aged, bald-headed but brilliant rocket mechanic puzzling over a venturi jinx.

"I'm so relaxed," said Thackeray with a sigh, "that I've started wearing a corset to hold myself together. What about you trying to woo that announceress into putting a blurb out about us over the address system? It worked once."

Pergold carefully took off the highly theatrical uniform jacket he was wearing and draped it over the back of a chair. His shirt was badly holed under the arms.

"That's better!" he said gratefully. "No, John, no more wooing. The more beautiful their voices the uglier their faces—that's a law of nature. I reckon I've done my share for Smith and Thackeray. You think of something."

"Like opening the air lock." Thackeray pulled open a filing cabinet drawer and extracted a pipe and tobacco. "My boy," he said solemnly, "we have funds for one more refuel—food for you; smoke for me; gas for the ship—and then we have to take to piracy."

"Be serious," urged Pergold. "I'm worried."

His clean, pink face with puppy-smooth blond eyebrows and hair did not look worried. He put his feet up on the table before him, so that Thackeray was able to see fresh evidence of their pauper state in the soles of his partner's shoes.

"You're not worried," said John affectionately, "you're bored. When I picked you up in Calcutta you were just the same—you jumped at this barn-storming idea. Anything so long as it keeps moving, that's you. That's why we get on together. I've been that way all my life. Only difference is I'm a lot older and haven't got quite the same amount of

fizz as you—but still, I'm getting bored, too, just sitting around here. There's nothing better than when we're out there scaring the pants off the passengers, but sitting here confined by four glass walls is just about using up my supply of philosophy."

"Are you suggesting we pack up?" asked Pergold without much emotion either way.

Thackeray pulled up a chair to the table and sat down. He put an oily hand to his bald head and scratched without thinking of the consequence. "I've been thinking of it," he admitted, "but as I see it the trouble is we're marooned here. Neither of us have got the fare back to Earth and the ship would burn to cinders if we tried to take her in—she's nothing but tin cans soldered together, as you know. So unless some angel turns up with the cash for our passage we're scheduled to become the first bums of Interplanetary Jump-off. I think I'd rather take the ship out for one last dive on to the Moon and let her keep going until she hits."

"Oh, stop it!" ejaculated Pergold. "We want constructive talk, not that bunk."

The door opened. A man stepped in.

"Is your ship available for hire?" he asked. He thoroughly enjoyed their consternation. He smiled thinly to himself as Pergold nearly overbalanced on his chair as he scrambled up, and John dropped his strictly illegal pipe.

"Of course, of course," said Pergold, snapping on first the eagle eye, then the rock jaw, then the squared back shoulders and lastly the cap. "At your service."

"Very good," commended the stranger, looking Pergold up and down with ironic admiration. "And is this your crew?" He turned his quizzical eyes on John. John blushed.

"Aye, aye, sir, I'm chief engineer of the good ship 'Magpie' sir."

"Excellent! I'm Holt Mannerling. I want to engage your ship for the day."

"Holt Mannerling!" said Pergold, forgetting all the tough props. "This is an honour, sir! I've read every one of your books."

Thackeray looked blank. He could truly say he had never read a single book since leaving school—other than engineering text books. He had not even heard of Holt Mannerling. But he could well believe he was a writer

without being told. Mannering was just what he would expect a successful writer to look like—supercilious, long hair, immaculately dressed, sensuous lips, voice with all the vowels strangled into surprising sounds, a 100% phoney quilted with banknotes.

"May I sit down?" asked Mannering, sitting down. "I plan to write an historical novel centred about the early days of exploration on the Moon." He addressed himself to Pergold standing to attention before him. "As you will know, my books are always soundly based upon actual experience—have you read 'Peruguaya'?"

"Oh yes, sir," declared Pergold.

"For that book I spent two months at Marspole. It shows, I think, this attention to detail. Well now, I need experience of rocket travel as it really was. I need a crammer course on all the perils of space flight as it was in the years just following 2000. I don't want milked-down incidents—if I am to engage you, you must be prepared to burn your ship out giving me the sensations I want—provided, of course, you get me back safely in the end. I'll pay whatever you ask, but I want total rights to your services."

"You have them, sir," declared Pergold with the ring of complete loyalty in his voice.

John judged from the glow of hero worship on his partner's face that the moment had come to take negotiations out of his hands.

"If you want us to risk the ship entire," he said, "it will cost an awful lot." He rubbed more oil into his scalp. "Giving a round figure, I'd say 5 million credits."

Holt Mannering smiled at him as if he read all of John's antagonism and knew the figure was intended to shake him. He stood up.

"Very well, that's settled. I'll be back in five hours time. Have everything ready."

He walked out of the office leaving behind a subtle perfume and screaming jubilation.

The partners spent the five hours devising a display of spacial terrors that would bring Mannering back grey-haired and the "Magpie" a burnt out wreck. It would be one last glorious jaunt before they retired to Earth. Smith and Thackeray flitted about the hull of their vessel laying wires and establishing caches of explosives and chemicals cal-

culated to bring off the dramatic effects they had in mind. Many effects were already built into the "Magpie", but the type of thing they planned now were once only effects leaving ruin behind them, too costly for repetition. Some of the effects were fitted quickly while the other was at the far end of the ship, and when at last they met together in the control room both rubbed their hands in secret hilarity at the anticipated panic of the other.

"Do you think you will be able to navigate the wreckage, my boy?" John asked with mock anxiety.

"You keep the fuel running—I'll get the wreck back. But . . ." Pergold hesitated and a serious look replaced his smile. "Take it a bit easy, eh, John? Mannerling's an important man. I mean, it would be a great loss to, er, literature if he was hurt. I . . ."

"Literature, bunk!" Thackeray looked sick. "He's no better than I am, and a lot worse if I'm any judge. He's asked for the full course and he's going to get his credits' worth. Wipe that schoolboy look off your face and be your age."

"Barbarian! Bald-headed moron!" retorted Pergold to hide his embarrassment. "Nothing's sacred to you above your stomach. Just look out, that's all. If you start getting too rough I'm bringing us straight back."

Thackeray surveyed the young man with over-acted surprise.

"What is this? Love at first sight? Now you listen to me: if you've got any duty to Literature, or whatever you call the tripe he undoubtedly writes, it's to see he gets what he's asked for—and by God, so far as I'm concerned he's asked for it and he's going to get it. See you do the same. If I see you getting too soft on this trip I'll blow the tanks and see how you get Lord God Mannerling out of that."

"You're thick enough to do it," said Pergold. "Now shut up and let's get all this junk out of sight before he comes."

They worked on in an atmosphere of tarnished gaiety, each silently incensed at the other for spoiling what should have been the greatest day of their lives. Mannerling picked it up at once when he met them in the office. He looked from one to the other with his cool, feminine eyes and smiled. He addressed Pergold. "Trouble with the crew,

Captain? Your good and faithful engineer radiates rancour."

"No; no trouble," said Pergold hastily. We've had a few hectic hours getting things ready, that's all, Mr. Mannering. Are you ready, sir?"

"As ever," answered Mannering casually. He dropped a cheque on the table before Pergold, and enjoyed the throttled emotions evidenced by the two men. "You understand," he said, "five million buys the 'Magpie'." He was looking directly into Pergold's eyes. "I want the ship to be a total write-off by the time we get back. You'll do whatever I ask you to do with her. I think you should for five million—don't you?"

"We'll do everything commensurate with your safety, sir," replied Pergold blushing.

John broke in dryly from the side: "Don't worry; the 'Magpie' will be as useful as a cinder by the time we get back. You'll get your credits' worth."

Mannering did not deign to look away from Pergold.

"Ready when you are, Captain," he said quietly.

"Captain!" muttered John contemptuously.

Holt Mannering was born in the new vertical slums of London. He had even at five, a willowy frame and near feminine features coupled, fortunately for him, with a will of steel. From his earliest days he had to fight to convince other boys that he could not be jeered at. He grew hard in body and spirit, and when he began to write, his stories were hard too and full of merciless action. He suited the temper of his times and became wealthy serving up the diet of unyielding superman fiction. He was loveless. He assumed men and women were looking for chinks in his armour, or if they were hero worshippers like Pergold, that they must be continually shown how cool and self contained he was. He worked hard at his reputation, knowing it was good publicity too, but feeling safe only when the world gasped at an exploit carried out in the search of colour. He entered the "Magpie" in the clear knowledge that he could only emerge after he had driven the captain and crew to near breaking point with terror at the risks he demanded be taken. He had to be harder than the "gnarled salts of the space lines" (as he saw the headlines).

He accepted the co-pilot's seat Pergold offered him and let himself be strapped in. Before him was a broad glass port giving a forward view over the hull to star-filled space, with immediately to his hands the duplicate set of controls (all fakes). He tossed a packet of cigarettes on to Pergold's control desk. "Help yourself." He lit one for himself.

"I'm sorry," said Pergold awkwardly, "but we cannot have smoking. It puts a bit of a strain on the air conditioning."

Mannerling smiled and waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Let it strain," he said softly. "Just carry on. Don't mind me."

The control room was quite spacious with two rows of armchairs bolted to the floor behind the pilot and co-pilot seats. Circular ports were let into the floor, ceiling, and two side walls, so that sightseers could have their attention directed towards stellar glories on all sides. Other than these commercial additions, the fittings were exactly as found in turn-of-the-millennium colony ships. The first impression was of endless dials on all wall space, the second impression of maze-like conduits backing up the dials, and the end impression one of ruthless exclusion of all aesthetic virtues in favour of efficiency. It was like the inside of an iron brain. Mannerling jotted down the impression, adding "ports like eye sockets."

Pergold moved a switch and the communication umbilical fell away from outside the ship and wound itself on to its drum on the platform below. He flipped other switches and spoke briefly to IJ radio centre. He followed this with a check back to John over the intercom.

"Temperature's running a bit high in number two tank," said John. "Think I'll switch over to that, get it out of the way first. Right: ready when you are."

Pergold ignited the main drive on full boost. This was the first big thrill for customers on the normal run. The hull seemed momentarily to vibrate into a blur; a monstrous hand slapped down on the body and smeared it flat—or so it seemed. Mannerling's cigarette flew backwards out of his hand, and buried itself somewhere on the back wall. The smoke in his lungs seemed to pass clear

through the membranes and spread out across his chest in agony. He nearly swallowed his tongue.

Pergold slapped off the drive, leaving only a trickle of fire to provide enough acceleration to approximate Moon gravity.

"O.K., Mr. Mannering?" he asked.

Mannering was silent for a moment, then coughed carefully. "You spoilt a DeVere Senior," he said calmly. "I hope there's nothing inflammable back there."

"We have to clear the main drive to test for maximum pressures. It's part of the old routine," explained Pergold.

"Although, of course, in the old days," continued Mannering, "the co-pilot knew what was going to happen and didn't have a chest full of smoke."

"I'm sorry about that," said Pergold politely.

A red light blazed from the control board. Pergold banged a button and shouted for John at the same time: "What you doing about No. 2? It's steaming!" A bell began ringing from the depths of the ship. "Get rid of it quick!" came John's urgent voice. "We'll be all over the solar system in a minute if you hold it."

Pergold watched a needle climb on a dial. His fingers began snapping over switches. "I'm rolling the ship to get No. 2 on the shadow side. Don't worry, I'm watching it."

Mannering coolly helped himself to another cigarette and lifted his head to enjoy the wheel of stars in the port above.

"Get rid of it!" came John's shout.

Pergold swept his right hand across a succession of switches. Suddenly Space went white with fire. From amidship came a prolonged roar. Fuel howled from discharge valves in an explosive torrent that ballooned out and ignited. The ship bowled end over end in reaction to the vast finger of fire that stuck from its side.

Mannering wrenched his eyes from the spinning heavens outside the port and forced his stomach to steady. He made a few notes on his pad, while Pergold played tunes on his control panel and brought the "Magpie's" axis to a halt.

"Phew," said Pergold.

Mannering smiled thinly. "That was expensive," he observed, and then, after a pause, "if it was rocket fuel."

Pergold did not answer. He had activated an illuminated

panel on which a lightning succession of glowing figures were flickering. Abruptly from this waterfall of shapes one line of figures flashed red and held.

"What shattering experience does this portend?" asked Mannerling, writing the line of figures on his pad.

"I just made a run through of information we've got taped on board regarding meteor streams, and tied our present course into it. Any intersection shows up in red—the co-ordinates, that is." He nodded at the screen. "That shows we enter a danger zone in about ten minutes at our present rate of progress."

Mannerling nodded interestedly.

"What do you do? Alter course?"

"No use," said Pergold. "I might be lucky and shift to an empty region, but I'd have to run a full check to be sure—about five minutes, at the end of which time I might be informed I was only a quarter minute from another stream.

"No: all the calculator can do is give a warning for us to be ready with anti-leak plasters."

Mannerling laughed. "Sounds delightful."

Pergold flashed him a look of reproach.

"It can be extremely dangerous Mr. Mannerling, and it is only right that you should know it. Modern ships fend off meteoric material, but this ship isn't protected in any way; so if we're hit, we are holed, and it was not unknown in the old days for passengers to be holed as well. We've been fortunate in that respect so far, but it is one of the risks they took and we still take." He opened a locker in the base of his chair. "Here's the first aid chest. Your chair has one, too. If I am injured, doctor me as best you can. You needn't fear about any injury to yourself—I'm fully qualified in first aid."

"Thanks," purred Mannerling in delight. "You put it very well. I'll do my best to dodge the meteorites."

They trickled on towards the Moon for some minutes, admiring the space scenery. Pergold kept a sly eye on the bulkhead chronometer, and forced himself to look away from the section of wall where he knew the first "meteor" would strike. From his station aft, John exploded the charge of explosive and capered silently as he listened to the clang vibrating down the length of the hull. He switched

on the intercom. "What was that?" he shouted. He grinned as he heard Mannering coughing and imagined the smoke-filled control room. Pergold swung a large plastic disc above his head and allowed it to cover the jagged hole. Air stopped screaming from the room. "Meteorite," he gasped. "Small, fortunately."

A barrage of explosions echoed up and down the length of the ship. A piercing whistle of escaping air followed immediately.

"Come on!" Pergold rapped at Mannering. "You'll find patches in every compartment. We've got to plug this lot. If you find you're beginning to suffocate, get into a suit." He rushed out.

Mannering grinned and rose leisurely and stood for a moment stretching his arms and legs. From his hip pocket he produced a silver flask and unscrewed the cap. Abruptly he found himself drifting from the floor with a bubble of golden liquor swelling from the flask. "Damn it," he grunted and slammed the cap back on to the flask. The violent movement sent him sailing upwards like an underwater swimmer. From further down the ship he heard Pergold shouting to John above the thin scream of escaping air. He added his own voice to the noise. "When you idiots have finished we can have a drink."

Pergold looked at John and nodded. John switched off the screaming device. Pergold swam forward and grasped the intercom-microphone. "What's happened to the damn engine?" he demanded. "Give me some gravity, quick."

"Help yourself to it," answered John dryly. "Or help me. We've had a rock through the peroxide feed—we've got no pressure. I want to go outside and have a look. Would Mr. Mannering care to come along?"

The offer came as a shock to Mannering. He had assumed that the hullabaloo had been sound effects off stage and that the "Magpie" had suffered no actual injury. Now he was being offered the chance to see the damage. He quickly co-ordinated his reactions and murmured "You are too kind." He followed Pergold to the next compartment, which John entered from the opposite side. Quickly he was helped into a space suit and shown the simple controls. Then John was clomping before him into the air lock.

"Careful how you go, sir," called Pergold, and then the

thick door closed. John worked some mechanism on the wall and presently Mannering found his suit rounding out as the air was evacuated from the room. The outer door then swung open and Mannering found himself floating out at the end of a rope attached to John's suit. It took his life-long exercise of willpower to prevent himself screaming as he discovered he had stepped off the edge of a million mile high cliff and was falling endlessly. He shut his eyes tight and wrenched his thoughts into the incredibly difficult problem of adding four and five. Don't look! Shut tight! One, two, three, four . . . ahhhh! plus one, that's five, plus one . . . oh my god! I shall be sick; where was I . . . five plus. Something touched him. He clutched at John like a man sinking for the last time. His eyes flew open and he feasted his eyes on John's shape like an ancient mariner looking on land after years of featureless watery wanderings. John was grinning.

"Take a grip of yourself, Mr. Mannering, not me," he said.

"You swine," breathed Mannering, "you didn't give me a chance to acclimatize. You knew how it would be."

"Not at all," said John carelessly. "Now, come on, Captain Smith will be wondering what's happened to us."

He produced a small pistol-like apparatus from his belt and quickly guided their drifting bodies back to the ship by means of small puffs of steam.

"Aft," said John, and pulled the still shuddering Mannering after him along the smooth metal hull. They came to a hole about a yard across surrounded by a frozen splash of metal. Inside the hole was a mash of piping covered with snow.

"Growks!" said Mannering bravely, using the latest form of exclamation, "did one meteor do that?"

"Probably no bigger than a quarter credit," assented John. "Wait here." He carefully stepped over the ragged edge of metal and knelt amongst the wreckage, head right down to examine the pipe under the outer sheath of the ship. He felt with his gloved hand in the blackness. "Good," he said, "the valve is O.K. Will you be all right here? I'll just go and bring some tube and welding gear." He went off without waiting for Mannering's answer. Cautiously Mannering raised his eyes and looked about him. Some-

thing in his chest in the neighbourhood of his heart seemed to turn in a quick spiral and tie itself into a painful knot. It was so beautiful, so immense, so near that he felt it brush the face plate of his helmet, so far it made him feel minute: a blaze of subtle colour more intense than any collection of jewels he had ever seen, and so unutterably alien to human life that he had to drop his eyes to the drab metal under his feet to comfort his soul. He stamped his foot in anguish. Where the hell was that moronic mechanic? Did they plan to leave him to go crazy out here?

His eyes felt moist with strange emotions.

John came back as a silhouette amongst the stars. "Hello," he said after plugging in his line, "all right?"

"Why not?" asked Mannering curtly. "Let's hurry up with this. You interrupted a drink."

John released his load of piping and gas cylinders. "I'll just hook a pipe from the valve across to the good section. Won't take long." He settled down in the hole with the welder while Mannering bent over to watch proceedings. The torch struck and instantly the hole became an inferno of burning oxygen. John worked on unconcernedly. Mannering jerked backwards in surprise. His feet left the hull. He began drifting away. He twisted in terror but it made no difference to his outward drift. He was twenty feet up and John was still shrouded in fire, working in ignorance of Mannering's predicament. Mannering shouted but, of course, he was unconnected to John's suit. He could see the whole of the "Magpie" now gleaming fiercely in the blinding sunlight. To his left hung the harsh ball of the Moon and to his right the larger and more beautiful globe of Earth. Between them lay the breathtaking fields of stars.

"Thackeray!" he screamed. "Smith!" His feet gradually rose to occlude the diminishing shape of the "Magpie." The Sun which had been behind him now lanced into his eyes. He remembered his instruction regarding the shields that were installed in the helmet to exclude sunlight and he fumbled with the simple control. The Moon, Earth and stars vanished; only the fantastic brightness of the Sun got through the filter. It stood in blackness like a mesmerizing eye. "Oh my god!" he groaned.

Pergold joined John at the hole and watched the receding

figure of Mannerling. "Do you think he's had enough?" he asked. "Poor blighter must be desperate by now."

John grinned. "All right, go and save literature from a fate worse than death."

"You're a cold-blooded baboon," said Pergold and jumped off in pursuit of the dwindling author. By using his steam gun he reached Mannerling within thirty seconds. He reached out and plugged into the other suit. "O.K., Mr. Mannerling?" Mannerling convulsed with shock and broke the connection. By the time Pergold managed to plug in again, Mannerling had stopped screaming and was down to swearing. He listened in alarm, uttering soothing words of apology where he could fit them in. He steered a course for the "Magpie" and eventually pulled Mannerling into the airlock. John helped them to disrobe in the central compartment.

"Was that planned?" panted Mannerling when his helmet was lifted off. "Did you deliberately let me cast away?"

"The frozen oxygen caught fire," explained John innocently.

"Don't avoid my question! Don't try to trick me, you sadistic couple of swine. . . ."

Mannerling's face was white with the intensity of the shock his nerves had suffered. He turned his eyes on Pergold, and Pergold read the homicidal message in them. "Now listen, Smith, from now on you do what I say—no more of your special effects—if you like play, you'll play as I want—and we'll see who'll scare the pants off who. Get back on course. Head for the Moon." He flashed a look at John. "Or else the deal's off."

"We've got the cheque," said John belligerently.

"I can stop it," said Mannerling, "and the Lord help you if you took me to court. I'd have you put inside for attempted murder."

They stared at each other, then Mannerling suddenly relaxed. "Come on," he said, "let's have that drink before we all start howling like wolves."

"Let's get some gravity first," agreed Pergold with relief. "The Moon, you say. Yes, sir, at once."

The drink did them all good. Mannerling most of all. He stood at the control room forward port with the flask in his hand and addressed Pergold and John who were seated

in the pilot and co-pilot seats. "Now I'll tell you what I want you to do. I'm sorry if it spoils any of the fun you planned for me, but for five million credits I want it my way. You know the Alpine Valley—I want a cruise up that. I also want to know what the Straight Wall looks like when one is headed straight for it just a few metres off the surface. I want to do some peak dodging in the Appenines. I want a really close up view of the Moon's surface so that I can smell it. Child's play for you, Pergold. There will be other things as we go along. I may want to land."

"Land!" ejaculated John. "You can't do that without permission; and anyway, this ship isn't equipped for landing."

"We'll see," said Mannering calmly. He looked over his shoulder at the enormous moonscape outside. "Better set your course, Captain."

Pergold exchanged glances with John.

"Better break open the G suits," he said in a slightly chilled voice.

They strapped each other into the stiff gravity suits. John went off to the engine room with one last reflective look at his partner. Pergold busied himself at the course computer. He wished he could have a quiet talk with John. Although he admired Mannering, his hero didn't seem to have any idea of the difficulties of navigating at many thousand miles an hour near planetary surfaces, and Pergold was not at all sure of his own ability to avoid collisions with peaks when the extent of warning would be in the order of one 10,000th part of an hour, or the $\frac{1}{3}$ rd second needed to cover a mile. In conclave with John he would have been able to devise some means of avoiding the trials ahead. Mannering seemed to know this.

The computer spat out a course correction which would bring them in on a downcurve over Mare Frigoris. Morosely Pergold punched off the necessary jet controls. The Moon edged into a new position.

"Bring it in real low," said Mannering comfortably. He put his feet up on the fake control panel and lit a cigarette. Pergold wrinkled his nose at the smell which was being continually recirculated. The luna landscape slowly wheeling outside grew as pocked as detergent foam. It filled nearly all the window in one vast arc, and then completely,

like a blinding backdrop picked out with black circles. Pergold crouched over the control board with his hands sweating. A bell pinged denoting that they had arrived at the set co-ordinates. Pergold took over, bringing the ship lower and lower in its trajectory. Suddenly the landscape transformed from plan to elevation. A few peaks notched the skyline and fled past below the ship in one lightning movement. Pergold felt the sweat burst from his face as he made minute corrections to their course so that they would come on to the mouth of Alpine Valley fair and square. He was much too high, he knew it, but every instinct in his body prevented him from pressing the switches which would drop them to the level of the sword-sharp peaks.

Mannering looked at him meditatively.

"Lower, Captain," he ordered. "I want a trip up the valley, not over it." There was a soft amusement in his voice that blotted out Pergold's instincts. He dropped the ship a thousand metres and gritted his teeth. There was nothing more he could do; if he was a shade of a degree out in course they were dead men now. The vast notch in the Alps loomed up suddenly. There was an impression of whirling light and shade and then they were through into *Mare Imbrium*. The cruise had lasted 20 seconds. Pergold slammed the jet switch that sent them soaring miles above the surface. There was a click as John switched on the intercom from the engine room.

"You bloody fool!" was all he said.

Mannering laughed loudly.

"And now the Straight Wall, please," he said.

Silently, knowing that Mannering was testing him in the same way as they had planned to test him, Pergold pulled out the Moon Navigation Manual and punched up the Wall co-ordinates. He read that the Wall, a natural rift in the surface of *Mare Nubium*, was 60 miles long and had a maximum height of 800 feet. To give Mannering the experience he wanted, the ship would have to be no higher than 400 feet from the level of the lower land to the east of the Wall. Pergold knew it was impossible to judge such a distance, impossible to set a line so exactly that it remained constantly level over the 100 mile run-in, impossible for jets to give the required unchanging thrust, and as experience had just shown, impossible for him to react

fast enough to lift the ship over the cliff at the right moment.

He piloted the "Magpie" in a vast curve across Mare Imbrium out over Oceanus Procellarum and back across the eastern borders of Mare Nubium. His heart sludged painfully as he watched the lit peaks begin to take on elevation. Mannering was crouched forward in his chair staring transfixed at the exploding scene outside. Blindly Pergold dropped the ship. The maniac careering landscape seemed to enter the fore-port. He noticed Mannering jerk back. Pergold was looking for the only help he could hope for—the raised land around the pit of Birt, ten miles from the Wall. This would give him just over two seconds' warning—if he reacted quickly enough.

There! He let loose every side jet. Pain crashed into him under a momentary eighteen G load. He didn't see the Wall. They were already a hundred miles above the surface. He dragged his fingers from the board and looked at Mannering. Mannering hung in his straps with his head lolling over. His face was paper white.

Pergold flipped a switch.

"Come up here, John. Mannering's passed out."

"And am I supposed to be conscious?" asked John caustically.

They released Mannering from the tight gravity suit and began massaging his limbs. While they worked they took the opportunity to talk.

"He's got us where he wants us," said John. "We've no contract. If we don't do what he wants he just cancels the cheque. If we go on he'll just kill the lot of us."

"Perhaps he's had enough," offered Pergold.

John shook his head with conviction. "Not him, he's driven. All that stuff about wanting experience for a book is just an excuse to satisfy a death wish. It would kill him to call it off. He's out to break us first. Then he will be able to call it off with a laugh. You mark if he doesn't insist on some peak dodging as soon as he wakes up. And after that another go at the Wall."

"I'll pass out if we have any more of that," said Pergold.

"I've got an idea," said John firmly. "Let's do plan Z."

Pergold looked appalled. "Is that supposed to be a better alternative?"

John waved him down. "We always said plan Z would be a do or die stunt to give maximum value to some hard nut: well, this is it. I think it's a better risk than leaving things to his warped imagination." John slapped the unconscious man's face pleasantly.

"Right," said Pergold. "You attend to him."

He rose and went to the control board. He knew the needed co-ordinates already and quickly set the ship into a new course. He next went to the wall cabinet housing the radio and deliberately smashed a few vital components. From the rear of the ship he detonated a few explosive charges which destroyed certain manoeuvring jets. He came back to John.

"We're committed to plan Z," he said tartly. "We ought to be committed to an asylum."

Five minutes later Mannering sighed and looked up into John's face. He wrinkled his almond-shaped eyes and said "Where am I?"

"In orbit round the Moon," said John unhelpfully.

Mannering allowed this to seep into his mind and then struggled up.

"My ticker," he explained with a grunt, touching his chest. "Where are we?" He wobbled to a port and looked out. There was no Moon, only a great black velvet circle that seemed to consume nearly all space.

"Something blew when we jumped the Wall," explained John. "Pergold's having a look now. We're in a close descending orbit round the Moon and at a rough guess I'd say we're approaching the Sea of Moscow."

"It's night," observed Mannering, still a little dazed by the kick his heart had given him.

"Yeah."

"Did you say, descending orbit?"

John nodded. He seated himself in the co-pilot's seat and twiddled idly with one of the fake controls. Mannering watched him in perplexity. "Well, what's going on?" he asked. "Aren't you going to correct the orbit? This is wasting valuable time so far as I'm concerned."

John looked patient. "If Pergold could have corrected the orbit he would have done. The manoeuvre jets don't respond. He's outside now having a look."

Mannering had recovered his composure.

"Let me have a talk with him. I'll uncork the jets."

"Radio's wrecked," said John unconcernedly.

"Sabotaged?" asked Mannering sharply.

John allowed a slight display of annoyance to pass over his face. "You don't lose your radio in space if you can help it. You can't go outside and give a good shout, you know."

A bell rang in the next compartment and John shot to his feet and left the control room. Mannering peered into the stygian blackness beyond the port. There was not even the remote edging of stars that there had been when he first looked. They were closer to the invisible surface without doubt. Mannering turned away abruptly. His imagination had begun to see terrible, jagged peaks scraping by below the ship. He went to join John where he was helping Pergold out of his space suit.

"Hallo, Mr. Mannering," said Pergold brightly. "Hope you feel better."

"What's the report?" snapped Mannering.

"Fused solid," said Pergold. "That blast I had to give when we went over the Wall fused 50 per cent of the manoeuvring jets. We're lame that side. I'm going to try and roll the ship, but without a full set of jets it will be completely hit or miss." He hesitated. "If I can't turn her we're going to hit, Mr. Mannering. I'm sorry it's turned out such a mess."

Mannering looked at them both for a few well-packed moments.

"O.K., play it your way, boys," he said in an unexpected American voice. He smiled at John and Pergold then sauntered back into the control room.

"By Hades, I could punch his head in!" breathed John. "I told you he was nuts." He looked at the chronometer above the air lock. "Better get strapped in. It's bound to be rough."

Pergold sat beside Mannering in the blackness of the control room. Only the glow of Mannering's cigarette and a couple of pilot lights on the board gave back duplicate reflections from the port holes. The effort to roll the ship had been abortive.

"Our only hope is that we may strike one of the dust areas on the Sea of Moscow," explained Pergold. "We're

coming in almost at a grazing angle, fortunately, and with luck we could skim to a stop." He stopped to allow Mannering to manifest emotion, but the cigarette end went on brightening and dimming in slow rhythm more indicative of near sleep. "Of course, if we strike rock we shall never know," added Pergold a shade piqued.

"Wake me up when we're down," murmured Mannering.

"What the hell's wrong with you?" demanded Pergold in a half shout. "This isn't the time to go to sleep!"

"Please, Captain," protested Mannering from the blackness.

Pergold reached out to the invisible control board and snapped on the searchlight located in the belly of the "Magpie." A television screen set into the control board sprang to white life. He switched it off almost immediately. "Stand by," he broadcast over the intercom.

"Good luck, boy," came John's muttered reply.

Pergold set his teeth. This could be very rough. Even though their speed was down to the low thousands, hitting a feather bed at the wrong angle could be fatal. He felt the first violent drag and the bounce.

There was a short interlude of peace while they skimmed towards the next landing, and then a deeper dig, and the G's shooting up and the first intimations of disaster; a slight wobble as they bounced off again.

"Hold everything!" shouted Pergold into the blackness. He tried to curl himself up in the control seat. His pants felt the first instant of tumble as they hit the surface again, and then everything spinning: his brains addled then obliterated: his body squeezed into a strange shaped jelly by the colossal centrifugal forces.

The "Magpie" sludged to a stop half buried in the dust. Dust hung for a short time above the ship, and then there was nothing to denote the billions of ergs that had been dissipated.

Pergold was the first to revive but it was a long while before he had recovered sufficiently to remember where he was. The ship was completely dark with not even a fuse light shining on the board. It was silent, too. Every piece of electrical machinery had stopped.

Pergold carefully tested his limbs and body. "John," he called, then realised the intercom would not be working.

"Mannering, are you all right?" he asked. He groped toward the neighbouring seat and found it empty. For a moment he had to sit still arguing with panic, then he rose and slid his way across the inelined floor to one wall where an emergency torch was always clipped. "Thank God!" he breathed as his fingers found the tubular shape. He extracted the torch from its clip and snapped on the switch. The first thing he saw was Mannering lying half way across the threshold to the middle compartment in a pool of blood.

The second thing he noticed was the thermometer on the instrument panel by the door. It read just above zero centigrade. He had a momentary conflict of priorities, then quickly stepped over Mannering and went through the middle compartment and down the corridor leading to the engine room at the rear of the ship. If the heating and air circulating systems remained out of action for very much longer *nobody* would live. He found John just recovered consciousness and still seated in his G seat rubbing his bald head. Pergold left him after a quick examination and went to the pile controls. It was shut down completely and locked. John must have taken this precaution before the bumpdown, thinking that he would be able to activate the pile immediately they were down. Quickly, Pergold brought power back to the ship, then went and helped John to his feet.

"There must be an easier way of earning a living," he said. "It's a miracle we're alive."

"It never went this way when we tried it out before," muttered John. "I've got a splitting headache. What do you think we should do?"

"It all depends on how Mannering is," said Pergold. "If he wakes up still thinking we're faking everything I reckon we'll have to carry on with the plan until he believes he's getting the real thing. He won't have what he wants for his novel until he experiences the 'real' thing—even if it isn't."

"If he thinks that landing wasn't the real thing, he needs his head examined," groaned John.

"That's an idea!" agreed Pergold. "I had better go and look at him. You take a pill then run a check on everything. I'd like to know if we can lift off when necessary."

John rubbed his head. "If you weren't so starry-eyed about dear Holt, you'd take off immediately without prolonging the agony."

Pergold felt too battered himself to argue. He walked out along the now lighted corridor.

The pool of blood was there, but the body had deposited itself in the co-pilot's seat and was laboriously extracting bandages from the medicine chest in the base of the seat.

"Let me do that," said Pergold hurrying forward.

Mannering's face was pale and ugly as if a layer of make-up had been washed off and smudges of blood added. His eyes were dull, his mouth mean.

"You've done enough," he ground out. "Keep your hands off me." He smeared ointment over his forehead then tried to wind a bandage around his head. He found it too painful to carry on.

"Oh, come on!" he said, holding out the end of the bandage with ill grace. Pergold tenderly bandaged the famous author.

"What happened?" asked Mannering after a pause.

"We came down on the Sea of Moscow. The dust saved us. John's checking to see if we can get off again."

Mannering made a throttled noise.

"Look, don't try to keep up that masquerade. What I want to know is why we came down so hard? Do you generally treat your customers so rough? You don't have to strain your acting abilities trying to convince me we're caught up in a drama of the space lanes. I don't feel in the mood for it. I'm thinking this crack on the head is worth about a million of your credits. Now did you mismanage that landing or was it intentional?"

Pergold's short but very active life had taught him many things, but patience and tolerance cannot be learned in 25 years. He sat down in the pilot's seat and switched on the intercom.

"Prepare to abandon ship," he said, and switched off.

"Get into your suit," he said frostily to Mannering. He began shutting down the board.

"Nuts," said Mannering without moving. "You're taking orders from me. I say to you, get this tub into orbit again at once, or no deal." He began straightening out a crushed cigarette.

"Mr. Mannering," said Pergold in a low voice. "If you don't get into a suit at once we'll have to stuff you into it. I am not joking."

Mannering looked interested.

"What is the situation supposed to be?" he asked. "What makes you so anxious to jump into a space suit? I find them most uncomfortable." He lit the cigarette. Pergold opened a drawer below the control table.

"By international agreement this side of the Moon is devoted to radio astronomy. There is no radio communication, there is no activity of any sort that would interfere with the astronomical work. There is no organisation for rescuing shipwrecks. If we want to save ourselves, we've got to walk to the nearest observatory. Now get into your suit."

He picked out the revolver from the open drawer and held it dangling at his side.

"Don't be so dramatic!" laughed Mannering. His expression changed. "I came for a ride, not a walk. Get this pile of junk into space and let's get back to the platform. I'm disappointed in you."

Almost Pergold concurred. He had certainly had enough. Only his regard for Holt Mannering kept him to the stipulated terms of the engagement. He leant over and grasped Mannering by the front of his jacket and jammed the revolver into his stomach.

"Come on!" he growled, and lifted.

Mannering rose clear from the seat. Pergold heaved with all his strength and Mannering went off gracefully in an arc towards the door. Pergold recoiled against the control board, then booted himself off in pursuit of the twisting body. He pushed Mannering's descending body through the door, and shouted for John at the same time. John came into the chamber and instantly understood the situation. He unhooked a suit from the line and flung it down beside the writhing couple. With his help Mannering was soon taped up inside the suit.

"Put dust shoes on him," panted Pergold.

Mannering let them fasten the broad shoes on to his feet without a struggle. He sat on the floor and watched them strangely. John and Pergold went about their preparations carefully. They hung about themselves a variety of

vacuum flasks filled with hot soups which could be connected to a mouth pipe via a valve. Pergold strapped a compass and lunar chronometer to his wrist, and John placed a large folded plastic sheet across his shoulders.

"Come on," Pergold said to Mannering. "We've got a long way to go." He walked to the control room, threw the revolver in and closed the door. "No need for that."

"No, indeed," agreed Mannering in an unanalysable inflection. He moved with John into the airlock. Pergold followed them, closed the door and switched off the light. In a short while the outer door opened, but it was so dark outside it was impossible to see the difference. Holding hands they carefully stepped out on to the surface of the Sea of Moscow.

Mannering felt almost ill with repressed fury. His pride was twisted into an agonising knot. He knew himself to be hard and sophisticated, and he had engaged these two circus clowns in the certainty that his coolness would batter their crass, lumpy infantile schemes into ridiculousness and their personalities to pulp. But they played rough to the point of near murder without turning a hair! Every effort of his to demonstrate the strength of his will and courage had been met by even more murderously stupid pranks. He had asked the damn fool of a pilot to fly up the Alpine Valley, *and he had done it!* That had nearly killed him. And then the Wall! The thought of the Straight Wall still caused Mannering to sweat. Now this! Still attempting like persevering children to trick an adult, they risk all in a crash landing, missing death by a miracle and then drag him out at pistol point on some crazy march. What could his fine, steel spirit do against such elephantine mental workings! At the end they would no doubt turn to him with a grin and ask for their reward, like puppies wagging their tails. What he would say to them then was his only comfort.

Their floundering feet stirred up an immense pall of dust which blotted out most of the stars. It was a worse sensation than drifting alone in space: at least, there were lights everywhere in the sky and if one looked, one's feet could be seen, if only as silhouettes. Here there was absolutely nothing to be seen and all the tactile sensations were unpleasant, particularly the way the feet slithered

down into the dust as if it were upward pressing air without real substance, which finally held solid without conviction.

Mannering felt the pull of the cord which connected him to Pergold, and he lurched after the leader. John followed at the rear. Over the communication wire he heard their muttered curses. Grimly he kept his own mouth shut.

"Let's hope we strike a firm stretch soon," said Pergold. "I want to take a star sight to establish our position. Couldn't do it in the ship—all the ports were blanked out with dust."

"Then you don't know where we are!" said Mannering despite himself.

"No," agreed Pergold. "Within fifty miles or so, that is."

"Oh, fine," breathed Mannering over the line. "May I suggest we've had enough of this particular game and that we all go back to the ship and have a drink?"

"May I suggest you shut up and keep moving," said John, bumping into Mannering. "Once you stop moving on this stuff, you sink."

Although put in Thackeray's usual uncouth and insulting way, it was nevertheless true. Mannering lurched on in momentary panic as he found the dust up to his hips.

They struggled on for hours, seemingly, without striking firm ground. Mannering felt the strength oozing out of his limbs along with the sweat that ran down his body. At last he heard Pergold say "All right, John, let's lay out the mat here. We had better rest for a while." There was a confusion of movement and then his hand was grasped and he was pulled down on to a level plastic surface which had been spread out. Thankfully he allowed his body to collapse inside the space suit.

"Better take a pull at one of your bottles, Mr. Mannering," he heard Pergold say. "Can't lie here too long, the whole sheet begins to sink after a while."

He did not deign to answer.

Before they set off again Pergold was able to shoot the stars, as the envelope of dust which accompanied them while on the move had largely settled during the rest period. Using his lunar chronometer and some simple tables printed on the cuff of his gloves he was able to estimate their

position to be about four hundred miles west of the nearest observatory. He announced this gravely to Mannering. "I should say we have about six walking days ahead of us. It will be critical. The suit air supply only lasts six days. We shall have to ration the drink." He was silent for a few moments. "What I'm really afraid of is being caught by dawn before we have begun the last twenty-four hour stretch. This is bad enough, but with sun up it's murder. The suits can hardly cope with the heat. I'm not sure how far off the terminator is." His voice trailed off.

"We had better get moving, then," said John. "Come on, before this mat sinks too deep to dig up."

They folded the plastic sheet in a weird, invisible touch dance, then set off in single file through the blackness.

Mannering had said nothing. He could not trust his voice to conceal the painful conflict that had germinated within him between his old conviction that all this was a heavy handed show put on for his benefit, and a new doubt as to whether men in their right minds would be prepared to endure six days of this hell for honour's sake. As he slogged along between Pergold and John it became more and more inconceivable that men would risk their lives landing on the night side, and face slow death in this dust trap, just to carry out the terms of a verbal agreement which could be denied without recourse. "My God!" his mind said to him suddenly, "these maniacs really have got us into a mess. This is life or death!" His legs went stiff when this broke on him. He fell over.

"Help!" he shouted. "Help, help, help!"

"What's the matter?" called Pergold. He came back and felt about until he came to the prone shape of the author. "Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

Mannering turned loose with a flood of curses and appeals that had little coherence.

"Give him a dig in the ribs," said John. Pergold ignored this dry advice. He knelt up to his chest in fluffy dust and lifted the almost covered Mannering to a near upright position.

"The deal's off," shouted Mannering over the line. "The deal's off, I tell you. Get me back."

"You're worn out," soothed Pergold. "O.K., let's have a sleep period. You'll feel better after some sleep."

Mannering swore until his voice broke. John laid the plastic sheet, then they stretched out upon it in a useless attempt to ease their rubbed limbs.

"I'll take first shift," said John. "When we begin to sink I'll wake you."

Pergold fell straight into sleep. Mannering moaned on and off through the whole period, even when he was roused and asked to help relay the mat every half hour. But by the time they came to start off again, he had regained command of himself. He was saved by his old slum training where if you came out of a fight second best, you bided your time and kicked the other when he wasn't looking; anything, provided it allowed the ego to tell itself it had revenged the insult. Mannering's unbalanced ego steadied itself by working up an evil temper directed against Pergold and promising itself a satisfactory revenge.

Mannering marched well for the first hour. He listened almost with amusement to Pergold and John's increasingly vile language directed at the dust. The hoped-for firm region did not materialise.

"I didn't anticipate so much of this dust," said Pergold. "We ought to go faster. We can't take longer than six days."

"I'm going all out," grumbled John.

Mannering's revenge sprang full-blossomed into his mind. He would delay them so that they could not complete the trek in six days. They would die. He hoped they would get within sight of the observatory as the air in their suit tanks was exhausted. He hoped Pergold would die crawling on his belly with his hands stretched out towards the unobtainable dome.

Mannering began slowing his pace. He asked for a rest. After the rest he complained of stiff thigh muscles—and truly they had cause to be stiff.

"Get the mat down again," ordered Pergold curtly.

John swore under his breath.

"Lay down," Pergold said to Mannering. Mannering was glad to do so. "Where are your legs?" said Pergold searching with his hands. He stationed himself kneeling besides Mannering then proceeded to rain punches at the heavy suiting around Mannering's thighs.

"Stop it!" demanded Mannering. "Stop it, you maniac!" Pergold took no notice. John joined in from the other side.

"I'm all right," shouted Mannering. He switched to vituperation. After a while the pummelling ceased.

"How are they?" asked Pergold clinically.

Mannering scrambled to his feet. The stiffness had gone. He kicked out in the direction of his young tormentor but only caused himself to over-balance. "Touch me like that again," he swore, "and I'll kill you."

John laughed and cut straight into speech. "Come on, we've wasted too much time as it is."

They folded the mat and lumbered on again.

Many hours later Mannering went flat on his face and couldn't move.

"Spread the mat," said Pergold with exhaustion in his voice.

They lay silent for a while, then Pergold roused himself and began the fussy business of sighting the stars now that the dust had cleared. He looked at his wrist by the light of a torch hung around his neck.

"Oh no!" he grunted.

"What's wrong?" asked John immediately, sitting up.

"The chronometer's stopped."

There was silence. Mannering raised his head. Even in his tormented state he could sense that tension had sprung into existence.

"That's done it!" groaned John. "That's your damn legs," he shouted at Mannering. "We're lost."

"Legs?" muttered Mannering. The treatment meted out to him to cure the cramp in his legs seemed so long ago it did not connect in his battered mind.

"We'll have to try it on compass alone," said Pergold. "But . . ."

John cut in caustically. "Yes, I should say it's 'but'. If we get within a dozen miles we'll be lucky—and in that rugged country you just won't see the observatory even if it were a couple of miles off. You know it; I know it."

"Lost!" suddenly shouted Mannering. "No, no, not lost!" His flailing hands caught Pergold's arm. "Get me out of here!" he screamed. He clawed his way up Pergold's suit until his helmet collided with Pergold's. "You're trying to kill me. Oh no, I don't want to die. Murderer!"

Pergold had to defend himself. The babble of voices

over the interconnecting wire was deafening. At last John and Pergold managed to sit on the thrashing man. John slid his hand behind Mannering's helmet. He turned off the air supply. "Stop fighting, or I'll suffocate you!" he shouted. Mannering heaved and then lay shivering. John turned on the air again.

In the silence they could hear Mannering whimpering.

"Come on," said Pergold like some robot juggernaut, "we've got about four hundred miles to do."

"I can't!" came Mannering's weak cry. "Leave me alone." Sounds of defeat came over the line. Pergold disconnected his line from Mannering. "What about it, John?" he said.

"He's broke," came John's muted voice. "Might as well get ourselves saved. I've had about enough of this."

Pergold flicked the little switch on the side of the compass that converted it to a radio direction finder homing on a transmitter in the "Magpie." "She's about half a mile off," he told John. "I reckon we did about twenty circuits." He plugged in again to Mannering's suit. "Come on Mr. Mannering. Follow me."

They set off through the complete blackness, Pergold with his wrist close before his eyes. After a few minutes, he collided with the half buried walls of the "Magpie".

"Home sweet home," he announced. He led them to the airlock and they crowded in. Soon they were back inside, with their eyes dazzled by the electric light.

Mannering stood in stupor. His face was streaked where tears had run through the mascara he used.

"Come on, Mr. Mannering," directed Pergold. "Get strapped in: we'll be lifting off right away."

"Lifting off?" asked Mannering with a frown of perplexity.

Pergold gently led him to the co-pilot's seat and strapped him in. "Soon be back on IJ," he assured him.

Expression crept back into Mannering's face.

"But how?" he croaked.

Pergold advanced the firing arm. "Like this," he said with a smile. It always gave the customers a great kick if ten Gs slammed them in the guts. Mannering passed out.

continued on page 66

Having thus achieved a modest success in the Rousing of Basic Passions we felt this a good point at which to introduce a New Form of Literature. With so many eminent people at present engaged in this amiable task it was time anyway to get into the act.

THE PLOT SICKENS

by Brian W. Aldiss

Dear Editor,

Having just read George Hay's "Synopsis" in IMPULSE 4 with the greatest enjoyment, I have decided to write you a story to—to what? To answer Hay's? To supplement it? To extend it? Perhaps to plagiarise it, for I certainly think he has hit on a beautiful idea that will give the greatest delight to the greatest number of readers. And should not writers take advantage of the smallness of the science fiction field by conversing through fiction with one another?

What George Hay has done is what Jimmy Ballard and Billy Burroughs are currently doing: straining out the fictive irrelevances from science fiction. We are all too sophisticated in the sixties to believe in characterisation, or in writers' clumsy attempts to persuade us that their fiction is in any way real, or an account of actual events. All we need is the facts of the fiction.

This is why we would not bother to see that long epic—what was it called now?—the film with what's-her-name—"Cleopatra", whereas we would have been the devoted slaves of a film about the making of "Cleopatra". We can't bear Somerset Maugham, but we read his notebooks. We need unshaped things: Fellini, Kafka's unfinishable novels, fragments of newspaper headlines, our own lives. "Edwin Drood" is worth a ton of "Little Dorrit"s.

We need reviews of science fiction novels, written the way

they write them in the fanzines, so that we can get our shot of the incredible in a solid undiluted chunk. Like:

Something in the City (Knave, 40c.) is the latest from up-and-coming Stan Kenyonne and describes the taking over of a city by a giant brain. This reviewer thought it was great, like an Avram Davidson story re-written by John W. Campbell. Needless to say, the city is New York. Dave Baxter, just sacked from the biggest advertising agency on Madison Avenue, is walking disconsolately home when he sees some strange grey matter oozing out of a gutter. There is a hospital nearby, where the famous gangster Jamie Girdiron has died under the surgeon's knife following an operation for a brain tumour. Girdiron's brain got thrown out along with some other chemicals that cause it to live and proliferate.

Dave Baxter stoops to pick it up, and it grows into his brain and takes him over, making him into a sadistic killer—and everyone he touches turns into a sadistic killer too. Even the people he casually brushes against in the street turn into sadistic killers. Soon New York is full of sadistic killers. The police are completely mystified. Luckily, Dave is a schizophrenic, and one half of his split personality does not catch the killer bug. But the chemicals seep through into it and make it proliferate. This is the good side of his brain, and everyone who is brushed by this side is turned into a saint.

Kenyonne has written a great parable about the perpetual duel between Good and Evil, and given us a love affair for extra measure. Although the climax of a gun battle in Central Park may seem a little hackneyed, Kenyonne cashes in usefully on his allegory by having the saints fire apples from bazookas at the killers—a special ingredient in the apples being the only substance that can stop the proliferation of the sadistic brain. Pretty good.

Ingurgitators of the Infinite (Rave, 50c.) is by an old master of the space opera, Lance Corporal E. E. Green. Like his equally famous name-sake, Graham Green, E. E. gets down to the plot straightaway. We begin with a massive spaceship very realistically described heading out of the solar system on a secret mission, propelled by a new drive, the McMoorcrow Drive. Its inventor, Merdoe McMoorcrow, a Hungarian, is aboard, together with his

beautiful daughter, Wosbee. She is in love with Jed Faircloud, the captain of the ship, but Jed is worried. He thinks the drive is not all it should be.

Sure enough, after two days, the ship vanishes from normal space and finds itself in a universe consisting almost entirely of something like sponge cake. Desperately, Wosbee volunteers to go outside and taste it, but Jed says no. He is getting more suspicious than ever. He recalls the plot of the previous book, and remembers how the apples were useless after they had gone bad; he figures that if this really is a sponge cake universe, it will soon go stale.

The crew is almost mutinying and holding Jed at gunpoint when he points to the windows—the unknown substance is going green and crumbling away! He uses the ship's computer to work out that they are in a nanosecond universe, where all time values are a million times Earth's. They blast off just before the entire universe vanishes into elapsed time.

Now Jed is in love with Wosbee. He tells her their secret mission—the ship was invented to go out into the galaxy to find God. They have a special new nuclear weapon aboard, Sol-Vex, with which to blast Him if they find Him, to make the universe safe for man. The girl pales. He realises she knows something!

Under torture, she confesses that her father, who is a religious maniac and a deacon in the Church of Scotland, learnt of the mission long ago, and his drive has special tricks built into it that will foil the God-seekers. They are lost in space with a crazy drive with a mind of its own!

This is only the beginning of an action-packed novel full of brand-new ideas. No more must be given away! Despite the heavy emphasis on religion, this is never boring, and E. E. Green fans will be delighted, especially with the climax—where God wins, but in a very ingenious way.

The Whine of the Last (Cave, 15s.) is a British offering by Anne Chagford, which was once thought to be a pen-name of Robert Heinlein. This is Miss Chagford's first full-length novel, and certainly shows promise, though the opening is a bit slow. The authoress has had the idea of a naval catastrophe that destroys civilization in Britain. As so often with the more intellectual science fiction, nothing much happens in the first few chapters—the kind of thing that

gets sf a bad name. People have headaches, particularly Doris Rickmanson and her handsome brother Terry, who has just been sacked from the biggest advertising agency on Frith Street. They also spend a lot of money, as do their friends, who also get headaches and begin to dissolve a bit. The gardener and his wife on their father's estate are very poor and are okay.

About page sixty, they give refuge one stormy night to a very strange old Hungarian called Merdoc McMoorcrow, who poses as a writer called Lance Corporal Green and says he has come in from the infinite. One of his legs is missing and he admits to spending money. The Rickmansons are suspicious—they do not believe any writers can be called Lance Corporal Green.

They are talking things over with the local chief of police when a news flash comes over the BBC saying that everyone in London is just breaking up and dissolving. Those in the wealthier sectors of town are going first. Suddenly, Terry guesses what is happening. Everyone is being taxed out of existence! He gets on to the Prime Minister right away.

Unfortunately, the Prime Minister is on holiday in the Scilly Isles. The rest of the story happily forgets all about the intellectual angle and follows the adventures of Terry and Doris and McMoorcrow as, painfully disintegrating, they race down to the Scilly Isles to inform the P.M., while civilization goes to pot all round them. Fortunately, they get there just in time but the chase—and the dreadful mutants they meet on the way—makes excellent reading.

Some of this book is rather corny (for instance, the authoress always puts "wireless" for "radio", but that must be allowed because she is British, always supposing she is not Heinlein) but the characterisation is good, as so often in this type of adventure, the neurotic and depraved P.M. being particularly vividly drawn.

The Curse of the Werewolf Women (Slave, 50s.) is a novelization by Sol Hunter of the film of the same name made by Independent from the three-part serial "Curse of the Werewomen" in the old "Stupendous Stories" of the forties. Like the film and the serial, it has one brilliant idea. If we only ever hear about male werewolves, there must

be an alternate Earth somewhere stuffed with *female* werewolves.

It turns out that the portal between the two worlds is in the Ural Mountains in Russia. The hero, an American Air Force pilot who has crashed there, staggers through the portal in Chapter Two, and falls into the hands (or paws I should say!) of six of these deadly and beautiful women. He manages to alert Washington.

The U.S. has to fly in its forces secretly, so as not to alert the Russians—who are already suspicious, since were-women have been seen and interrogated in the streets of Moscow and outside the biggest advertising agency on Red Square.

Unfortunately, it is a quality of the portal that no machinery can pass through it, so the G.I.s go in loaded with sling shot and swords, led by the half-disintegrated figure of Lance Corporal Green, now promoted in rank, who just managed to get away from Britain in time.

After this rather dull start, the book hots up, and works up to a splendid bit of sword and sorcery. But one point of logic the author seems to have overlooked kills the whole thing dead for this reviewer. Who could possibly believe in a female werewolf?

Believe me, dear Editor,
Your underpaid servant,
— BRIAN W. ALDISS

THE REAL THING—*continued from page 61*

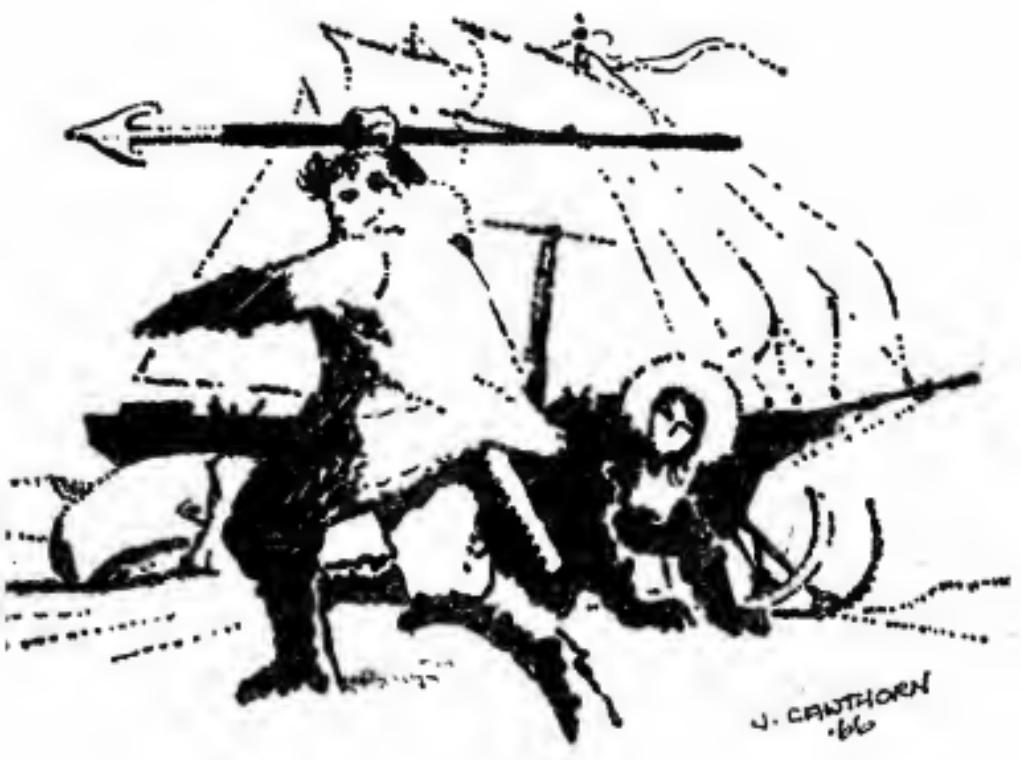
On 12, Mannering was handed over to his secretary and put to bed. He recovered all his faculties after a good sleep and food, and spent a few hours enjoying the luxury of his bed with such appreciation as he could not recall since boyhood. He ordered the payment of 5 million credits with goodwill. He reckoned Smith & Thackeray had earned it. His novel "Moondays" is undoubtedly his finest.

— ERIC C. WILLIAMS



THE ICE SCHOONER

MICHAEL MOORCOCK



The time is the distant future, the place Earth; an Earth covered by the white manile of the Fourth Ice Age. Across the frozen wastes skim the strange ice schooners, relics of the once-rich culture of the ice.

The Matto Grosso, now a frozen plain, is dominated by the great cleft-city of Friesgalt. Konrad Arflane, an unemployed and embittered ship captain, saves the life of its ruler, the Lord Pyotr Rorsefne. From the old man he hears

a strange story and accepts a stranger commission ; to sail Ice Spirit, flagship of the Rorsefne fleet, to the half-legendary New York, where it is said the Ice Mother herself holds court. He meets the members of the Rorsefne household ; the beautiful Ulrica, Pyotr's daughter, her husband Janek Ulsenn, the enigmatic Manfred Ulsenn and the even stranger harpooner Urquart, who claims to be a bastard son of the old Lord himself.

Arflane accepts his charge. Later, a herd of the fast-vanishing land whales is sighted close to Friesgalt ; he agrees to skipper the private yacht of the Rorsefnes, and follow the hunt.

CHAPTER SIX

The Whale Hunt

DIVIDED FROM THE main fleet by a low wall of ice blocks, the yacht, slim-prowed and handsome, lay in her anchor lines in the private Rorsefne yard.

Tramping across the ice in the cold morning, with the sky a smoky yellow, broken by streaks of orange and a dark pink that the ice reflected, Arflane followed Manfred Rorsefne as he made his way towards the yacht through the still soft layer of snow. Behind Arflane came Janek and Ulrica Ulsenn, sitting on a small, ornate sleigh drawn by servants. Man and wife sat side by side, swathed in rich furs, their hands buried in huge muffs, their faces almost wholly hidden by their hoods.

The yacht had already been crewed, and the men were preparing to sail. A bulky, spring operated harpoon gun, rather like a giant crossbow, had been loaded and set up in the bow. The big, savage harpoon with its half-score of tapering barbs jutted out over the bowsprit, a virgin's vision of a phallus.

Arflane smiled as he looked at the heavy harpoon. It seemed too big for the slender yacht that carried it. It

dominated the boat—a fore-and-aft rigged schooner—it drew all attention to itself. It was a fine, cruel harpoon.

He followed Manfred up the gangplank and was surprised to see Urquart standing there, watching them from sharp, sardonic eyes, his own harpoon cradled as always in his left arm, his gaunt features and tall body immobile until he turned his back on them suddenly and walked aft up the deck towards the wheelhouse.

Janek Ulsenn, his lips pursed and his expression one of thinly disguised anxiety, was helping his wife on board. Arflane thought that perhaps she should be helping her husband.

A ship's officer in white and grey fur came along the deck towards the new arrivals. He addressed Manfred Rorsefne, though protocol demanded that he address the senior member of the family, Janek Ulsenn.

"We're ready to sail, sir. Will you be taking command?"

Manfred shook his head slowly and smiled, stepping aside so that he no longer stood between Arflane and the officer.

"This is Captain Arflane. He will be master on this trip. He has all powers of captain."

The officer, a stocky man in his thirties with a black, rimed beard, nodded to Arflane in recognition. "I know of you, sir. Proud to sail with you. Can I show you the ship before we loose lines?"

"Thanks." Arflane left the rest of the party and accompanied the officer towards the wheelhouse. "What's your name?"

"Haeber, sir. First officer. We have a second officer, a bosun and the usual small complement. Not a bad crew, sir."

"Used to whale hunting?"

A shadow passed across Haeber's face. He said quietly: "No, sir."

"Any of the men whaling hands?"

"Very few, sir. We have Mr. Urquart aboard, as you know, but he's a harpooner of course."

"Then your men will have to learn quickly, won't they?"

"I suppose so, sir." Haeber's tone was carefully non-committal. For a moment it was in Arflane's mind to echo Haeber's doubt; then he spoke briskly.

"If your crew's as good as you say, Mr Haeber, then we'll

have no trouble on the hunt. I know whales. Make sure you listen carefully to every order I give and there'll be no great problems."

"Aye, aye, sir." Haeber's voice became more confident.

The yacht was small and neat. She was a fine craft of her class, but Arflane could see at once that his suspicions as to her usefulness as a whaler were justified. She would be fast—faster than the ordinary whaling vessels—but she had no strength to her. She was a brittle boat. Her runners and struts were too thin for heavy work and her hull was liable to crack on collision with an outcrop of ice, another ship, or a fully-grown whale.

Arflane decided he would take the wheel himself. This would give the crew confidence, for his helmsmanship was well known and highly regarded. But first he would let one of the officers take the ship on to the open ice while he got the feel of her. Her sails were ready for letting out and men stood by the anchor capstans along both sides of the deck.

After testing the wheel, Arflane took the megaphone Haeber handed him and climbed the companionway to the bridge above the wheelhouse.

Ahead he could see the distant outlines of ships sailing under full canvas towards the South Ice. The professional whalers were well ahead and Arflane was satisfied that at least the yacht would not get in their way before the main hunting began and the whale herd scattered. It was always at this time that the greatest confusion arose, with danger of collision as the ships set off after their individual prey. The yacht should come in after the whalers had divided and be able to select a small whale to chase—preferably some half-grown calf. Arflane sighed, annoyed at having to hunt such unmanly prey just for the sport of the aristocrats who were now traipsing along the deck towards the bridge. They were plainly planning to join him and, since the craft was theirs, they had a right to be on the bridge so long as they did not interfere with the captain's efficient command of the ship.

Arflane lifted the megaphone.

"All hands to their posts!"

The few crewmen who were not at their posts hastened to them. The others tensed, ready to obey Arflane's orders.

"Cast off all anchors!"

As one, the anchor men let go the anchor lines and the ship began to slide towards the gap in the ice wall. Her runners scraped and bumped rhythmically as she gained speed down the slight incline and passed between the ice blocks, making for the open ice.

"Ready the mains'l!"

The men in the yards of the mainmast placed their hands on their halyards.

"Let go the mains'l!"

The sail cracked open, its boom swinging as it filled out. The boat's speed doubled almost at once. At regular intervals Arflane ordered more sail on and soon the yacht was gliding over the ice under full canvas. Air slapped Arflane's face, making it tingle with cold. He breathed in deeply, savouring the sharp chill of it in his nostrils and lungs, clearing the stale city air from his system. He gripped the bridge rail as the boat rode the faint undulations of the ice, carving her way through the thin layer of snow, crossing the black scars left by the runners of the ships who had gone ahead of her.

The sun was almost at zenith, a dull, deep red in the torn sky. Clouds swept before them, their colours changing gradually from pale yellow to white against the clear blue of the sky; the colour of the ice changed to match the clouds, now pure white and sparkling. The other ships were hull down below the distant horizon. Save for the slight sounds that the ship made, the creak of yards and the bump of the runners, there was silence.

Tossed by the tearing skids, a fine spray of snow rose on both sides of the boat as she plunged towards the South Ice.

Arflane was conscious of the three members of the Friesgalt ruling family standing behind him. He did not turn. Instead he looked curiously at the figure who could be seen leaning in the bow by the harpoon gun, his gloved fingers gripping a line, his bizarre, strangely-dressed hair streaming behind him, his lance cradled in the crook of his arm. Urquart, either from pride or from a wish for privacy, had spoken to no one since he had come aboard. Indeed, he had boarded the craft of his own accord and his right to be there had not been questioned as yet.

"Will we catch the whalers, captain?" Manfred Rorsefne

spoke as quietly as ever ; there was no need to raise his voice in the near-tangible silence of the icebergs.

Arflane shook his head. "No chance."

He knew in fact there was every chance of catching the professional whalers ; but he had no intention of doing so and fouling their hunting. As soon as they were well under way he planned to take in sail on some pretext and cut his speed.

An hour later the excuse occurred to him. They were leaving the clean ice and entering a region sparsely occupied by ridges of ice standing alone and fashioned into strange shapes by the action of the wind. He deliberately allowed the boat to pass close by one of these, to emphasise the danger of hitting it.

When they were past the spur, he half-turned to Rorsefne, who was standing behind him. "I'm cutting speed until we're through the ridges. If I don't, there's every chance of our hitting one and breaking up—then we'll never see the whale herd."

Rorsefne gave him a cynical smile, doubtless guessing the real reason for the decision, but made no comment.

Sail was taken in, under Arflane's instructions, and the boat's speed decreased by almost half. The atmosphere on board became less tense. Urquart, still in his self-appointed place in the bow, turned to glance up at the bridge. Then, as if he had satisfied himself on some point, he shrugged slightly and turned back to look out towards the horizon.

The Ulsenns were sitting on a bench under the awning behind Arflane. Manfred Rorsefne leaned on the rail, staring up at the streamers of clouds above them.

The ridges they were now passing were carved into impossible shapes by the elements.

Some were like half-finished bridges, curving over the ice and ending suddenly in jagged outline. Others were squat, a mixture of rounded surfaces and sharp angles ; and still others were tall and slender, like gigantic harpoons stuck butt-foremost into the ice. Most of them were in clumps set far enough apart to afford easy passage for the yacht as she glided on her course, but every so often Haeber at the wheel would steer a turn or two to one side or another to avoid a ridge.

The ice under the runners was rougher than it had been, for this ground was not travelled as much as the smoother terrain surrounding the cities. The boat's motion was still easy, but the undulation was more marked than before.

In spite of the lack of canvas, the yacht continued to make good speed, sails swelling with the steady following wind.

Knowing there was as yet little for him to do, Arflane agreed to Rorsefne's suggestion that they go below and eat. He left Hacber in charge of the bridge and the bosun at the wheel.

The cabins below were surprisingly large, since no space was used for carrying cargo of any kind other than ordinary supplies. The main cabin was as luxuriously furnished, by Arflane's standards, as the *Ice Spirit's* had been, with chairs of canvas stretched on bone frames, an ivory table and ivory shelves and lockers lining the bulkhead. The floor was carpeted in the tawny summer coat of the wolf (a beast becoming increasingly rare) and the ports were large, letting in a great deal more light than was usual in a boat of her size.

The four of them sat around the carved ivory table while the cook served their midday meal of broth made from the meat of the snow kite, seal steaks and a mess of the lichen that grew on the surface of the ice in certain parts of the plateau. There was hardly any conversation during the meal, which suited Arflane. He sat at one end of the table, while Ulrica Ulsenn sat at the other. Janek Ulsenn and Manfred Rorsefne sat on his right and left. Occasionally Arflane would look up from his food at the same time as Ulrica Ulsenn and their eyes would meet. For him, it was another uncomfortable meal.

By the early afternoon the boat was nearing the region where the whales had been sighted. Arflane, glad to be away from the company of the Ulsenns and Manfred Rorsefne, took over the wheel from the bosun.

The masts of some of the whalers were now visible in the distance. The whaling fleet had not, it appeared, divided yet. All the ships seemed to be following much the same course, which meant that the whales were still out of sight.

As they drew nearer, Arflane saw the masts of the ships begin to separate; it could only mean that the herd had been sighted. The whalers were spreading out, each ship chasing its individual quarry.

Arflane blew into the bridge speaking tube. Manfred Rorsefne answered.

"The herd's been spotted," Arflane told him. "It's splitting up. The big ones will be what the whalers are after. I suppose we'll find a little whale for ourselves."

"How long to go, captain?" Rorsefne's voice now held a trace of excitement.

"About an hour." Arflane answered tersely, and replaced the stopper of the speaking tube.

On the horizon to starboard was a great cliff of ice rising hundreds of feet into the deep purple of the sky. To port were small sharp ridges of ice running parallel to the cliffs. The yacht was sailing between them now towards the slaughtering grounds where ships could be discerned already engaged in hunting down and killing the great beasts.

Standing on the bridge, Arflane prepared to go down and take the wheel again as he saw the prey that the yacht would hunt: a few bewildered calves about half a mile ahead of them, almost directly in line with the boat's present course. Rorsefne and the Ulsenns came up to the rail, craning their necks as they stared at the quarry.

They were soon passing close enough to be able to see individual ships at work.

With both hands firmly on the wheel and Haeber beside him with his megaphone ready to relay orders, Arflane guided the boat surely on her course, often steering in a wide arc to avoid the working ships.

Dark red whale blood ran over the churned whiteness of the ice; small boats, with harpooners ready in their bows, sped after the huge mammals or elsewhere were hauled at breakneck pace in the wake of skewered Leviathans, towed by taut harpoon lines wound around the small capstans in the bows. One boat passed quite close, seeming hardly to touch the ground as it bounced over the ice, drawn by a pain-enraged cow who was four times the length and twice the height of the boat itself. She was opening and shutting her massive, tooth-filled jaws as she moved, using

front and back flippers to push herself at almost unbelievable speed away from the source of her agony. The boat's runners, sprung on a matrix of bone, came close to breaking as she was hurled into the air and crashed down again. Her crew were sweating and clinging grimly to her sides to avoid being flung out; those who could doused the running lines with water to stop them burning. The cow's hide, scarred, ripped and bleeding from the wounds of a dozen harpoons, was a brown-grey colour and covered in wiry hair. Like most of her kind, it did not occur to her to turn on the boat which she could have snapped in two in an instant with her fifteen-foot jaws.

She was soon past, and beginning to falter as Arflane watched.

In another place a bull had been turned over onto his back and was waving his massive flippers feebly in his death throes. Around him, several boatloads of hunters had disembarked on to the ice and were warily approaching with lances and flenching cutlasses at the ready. The men were dwarfed by the monster who lay dying on his back, his mouth opening and shutting, gasping for breath.

Beyond, Arflane saw a cow writhing and shuddering as her blood spouted from a score of wounds.

The yacht was almost on the calves now.

Arflane's eyes were attracted by a movement to starboard. A huge bull whale was rushing across the ice directly in the path of the yacht, towing a longboat behind him. A collision was imminent.

Desperately, he swung his wheel hard over. The yacht's runners squealed as she began to turn, narrowly missing the snorting whale, but still in danger of fouling the boat's lines and wrecking them both. Arflane leaned with all his strength on the wheel and barely succeeded in steering the yacht on to a parallel course. Now he could see the occupants of the boat. Standing by the prow, a harpoon ready in one hand, the other gripping the side, was Captain Brenn. His face was twisted in hatred for the beast as it dragged his longboat after it. The whale, startled by the sudden appearance of the yacht, now turned round until its tiny eyes glimpsed Brenn's boat. Instantly it rushed down on Brenn and his crew. Arflane heard the captain scream as the huge

jaws opened to their full extent and crunched over the longboat.

A great cry went up from the whalers as the bull shook the broken boat. Arflane saw his friend flung to the ice and attempt to crawl away, but now the whale saw him and its jaws opened again, closing on Brenn's body.

For a moment the whaling captain's legs kicked, then they too disappeared. Arflane had automatically turned the wheel again, to go to the rescue of his friend, but it was too late.

As they bore down on the towering bulk of the bull, he saw that Urquart was no longer at the bow. Manfred Rorsefne stood in his place, swinging the great harpoon gun into line.

Arflane grabbed his megaphone and yelled through it.
"Rorsefne! Fool! Don't shoot it!"

The other evidently heard him, waved a one-handed acknowledgement, then bent back over the gun.

Arflane tried to turn the boat's runners in time, but it was too late. There was a thudding concussion that ran all along the boat as the massive harpoon left the gun and, its line racing behind it, buried itself deep in the whale's side.

The monster rose on its hind flippers, its front limbs waving. A high screaming sound came from its open jaws and its shadow completely covered the yacht. The boat lurched forward, dragged by the harpoon line, its forward runners rising off the ice. Then the line came free. Rorsefne had not secured it properly. The boat thudded down.

The bull lowered his bulk to the ice and began to move rapidly towards the yacht, its jaws snapping. Arflane managed to turn again; the jaws missed the prow, but the gigantic body smashed against the starboard side. The yacht rocked, nearly toppled, then righted herself.

Manfred Rorsefne was fumbling with the gun, trying to load another harpoon. Then the starboard runners, strained beyond endurance by the jolt they had taken, cracked and broke. The yacht collapsed on to her starboard side, the deck sloping at a steep angle. Arflane was sent flying against the bulkhead as the yacht skidded sideways across the ice, colliding with the rear quarters of the whale as it turned to attack.

Arflane reached out and grabbed the rail of the companionway, began with great difficulty to crawl up to the bridge. His only thoughts now were for the safety of Ulrica Ulsenn.

As he clambered up, he stared into the terrified face of Janek Ulsenn. He swung aside to let the man push past him. When he reached the bridge, he saw Ulrica lying crumpled against the rail.

Arflane slithered across the sloping deck, and crouched to turn her over. She was not dead, but there was a livid bruise on her forehead.

Arflane paused, staring at the beautiful face; then he swung her across his shoulder and began to fight his way back to the companionway as the whale bellowed and returned to the attack.

When he reached the deck the crewmen were clambering desperately over the port rail, dropping to the ice and running for their lives. Manfred Rorsefne, Urquart and Haebcr were nowhere to be seen; but Arflane made out the figure of Janek Ulsenn being helped away from the wrecked boat by two of the crew.

Climbing across the sloping deck by means of the tangle of rigging, Arflane had almost reached the rail when the whale crashed down on the boat's bow. He fell backwards against the wheelhouse, seeing the vast bulk of the creature's head a few feet away from him.

He lost his hold on Ulrica and she rolled away from him towards the stern. He crawled after her, grabbing at the trailing fabric of her long skirt. Again the boat listed, this time towards the bow; he barely managed to stop himself being catapulted into the gaping jaws by clinging to the mainmast shrouds. Supporting the woman with one arm, he glanced around for a means of escape.

As the whale's head turned, the cold, pain-glazed eyes of the monster regarding him, he grabbed the starboard rail and flung himself and the girl toward and over it, careless of any consideration other than escaping the beast for a few moments.

They fell heavily to the snow. He dragged himself upright, once again got Ulrica Ulsenn over his shoulder and began to stumble away, his boots sliding on the ice beneath the thin covering of snow. Ahead of him lay a harpoon

that must have been shaken from the ship. He paused to pick it up, then staggered on. Behind him the whale snorted; he heard the thump of its flippers, felt them shaking the ground as the beast lumbered in pursuit.

He turned, saw the creature bearing down on him, threw Ulrica's body as far away from him as possible and poised the harpoon. His only chance was to strike one of the eyes and pierce the brain, killing the beast before it killed him; then he might save Ulrica.

He flung the harpoon at the whale's glaring right eye. The barbs struck true, pierced, but did not reach the brain. The whale stopped in its tracks, turning as it attempted to shake the lance from its blinded eye.

Then the left eye saw Arflane.

The creature paused, snorting and squealing in a curiously high-pitched tone.

Then, before it could come at him again, Arflane saw a movement to his right. The whale saw it too and moved its head, opening its jaws.

Urquart with his huge harpoon held in one hand, came running at the beast; hurled himself without stopping at its body, his fingers grasping its hair.

The whale reared again, but could not dislodge the harpooner. Urquart began relentlessly to climb up on to its back. The whale, instinctively aware that once it rolled over and exposed its belly it would be lost, bucked and threshed, but could not rid itself of the small creature that had now reached its back and, on hands and knees, was moving up to its head.

The whale saw Arflane again and snorted.

Cautiously, it pushed itself forward on its flippers, forgetting its burden. Arflane was transfixed, watching in fascination as Urquart slowly rose to a standing position, planting his feet firmly on the whale's back and raising his harpoon in both hands.

The whale quivered, as if anticipating its death. Then Urquart's muscles strained as, with all his strength, he drove the mighty harpoon deep into the creature's vertebrae, dragged it clear and plunged it in again.

A great column of blood gouted from the whale's back, obscuring all sight of Urquart and spattering down on

Arflane. He turned towards Ulrica Ulsenn as she stirred and moaned.

The hot black blood rained down on her too, drenching them both.

She stood up dazedly and opened her arms, her golden eyes looking deep into Arflane's.

He stepped forward and embraced her, holding her tightly against his blood-slippery body while behind them the monster screamed, shuddered and died. For minutes its pungent, salty blood gushed out in huge spurts, drenching them, but they were hardly aware of it.

Arflane held the woman to him. Her hands clutched at his back as she shivered and whimpered. She had begun to weep.

He stood there holding her for several minutes at the very least, his own eyes tightly shut, before he became aware of the presence of others.

He opened his eyes and looked about him.

Urquart lounged nearby, his body relaxed, his eyes hooded, his face as sternly set as ever. Near him was Manfred Rorsefne. The young man's left arm hung limply at his side and his face was white with pain, but when he spoke it was in the same light, insouciant tone he always used.

"Forgive me this interruption, captain. But I think we are about to see the noble Lord Janek . . ."

Reluctantly Arflane released Ulrica; she wiped blood from her face and looked about her vaguely. For a second she held his arm, then released it as she recognised her cousin.

Arflane turned and saw the dead bulk of the monster towering over them only a few feet away. Rounding it, aided by two of his men, came Janek Ulsenn. He had broken at least one leg, probably both.

"Haeber is dead," Manfred said. "And half the crew."

"We all deserve to be dead," grunted Arflane. "I knew that boat was too brittle—and you were a fool to use the harpoon. It might have avoided us if you hadn't provoked it."

"And then we should have missed the excitement!" Rorsefne exclaimed. "Don't be ungrateful, captain."

Janek Ulsenn looked at his wife and saw something in her expression that made him frown. He glanced at

Arflanc questioningly. Manfred Rorsefne stepped forward and gave Ulsenn a mock salute.

"Your wife is still in one piece, Janek, if that's what concerns you. Doubtless you're curious as to her fate after you left her on the bridge . . . ?"

"Arflanc looked at Rorsefne. "How did you know he did that?"

Manfred smiled. "I, captain, climbed the rigging. I had a splendid view. I saw everything. No one saw me." He turned his attention back to Janek Ulsenn. "Ulrica's life was saved by Captain Arflane and later, when he killed the whale, by Cousin Urquart. Will you thank them, my lord?"

Janek Ulsenn said: "I have broken both my legs."

Ulrica Ulsenn spoke for the first time. Her voice was as vibrant as ever though a little distant, as if she had not entirely recovered from the shock.

"Thank you, Captain Arflane. I am very grateful. You seem to make it your business, saving Rorsefnies." She smiled weakly and looked round at Urquart. "Thank you, Long Lance. You are a brave man. You are both brave."

The glance she then turned on her husband was one of pure contempt. His own expression, already drawn by the pain from his broken legs, became increasingly tense. He spoke sharply. "There is a ship which will take us back." He motioned with his head. "It is over there. We will go to it, Ulrica."

When Ulrica obediently followed her departing husband as he was helped away by his men, Arflane made to step forward; but Manfred Rorsefne's hand gripped his shoulder.

"She is his wife," Manfred said softly and quite seriously.

Arflane tried to shake off the young man's grip. In a lighter tone Manfred added: "Surely you, of all people, respect our old laws and customs most, Captain Arflane?"

Arflane spat on the ice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Funeral on the Ice

LORD PYOTR RORSEFNE had died in their absence ; two days later his funeral took place.

Also to be buried that day were Brenn of the *Tender Maiden* and Haeber, first officer of the ice yacht. There were three separate funerals being held beyond the city, but only Rorsefne's was splendid.

Looking across the white ice, with its surface snow whipped into eddying movement by the frigid wind, Arflane could see all three burial parties. He reflected that it was the Rorsefnes who had killed his old friend Brenn and Haeber, too ; their jaunt to the whaling grounds had caused both deaths. But he could not feel much bitterness.

On his distant left and right were the black sledges bearing the plain coffins of Brenn and Haeber, while ahead of him moved the funeral procession of Pyotr Rorsefne, of which he was part, coming behind the relatives and before the servants and other mourners. His face was solemn, but Arflane felt very little emotion at all, although initially he had been shocked to learn of Rorsefne's death.

Wearing the black sealskin mourning cloak, stitched with the red insignia of the Rorsefne clan, Arflane sat in a sleigh drawn by wolves with black-dyed coats. He held the reins himself. Also in the heavy black cloaks Manfred Rorsefne and the dead man's daughter, Ulrica, sat together on another sleigh drawn by black wolves, and behind them were miscellaneous members of the Rorsefne and Ulsenn families. Janek Ulsenn was too ill to attend. At the head of the procession, moving slowly, was the black funeral sleigh, with its high prow and stern, bearing the ornate ivory coffin in which lay the dead lord.

Ponderously, the dark procession crossed the ice. Above it, heavy white clouds gathered and the sun was obscured. Light snow was falling.

At length the burial pit came into sight. It had been carved from the ice and gleaming blocks of ice stood piled to one side. Near this pile stood a large loading boom which had been used to haul up the blocks. The boom with its struts and hanging tackle looked like a gallows, silhouetted against the cold sky.

The air was very quiet, save for the slow scrape of the runners and the faint moan of the wind.

A motionless figure stood near the piled ice blocks. It was Urquart, face set as usual, bearing his long lance as usual, come to witness his father's burial. Snow had settled on his piled hair and his shoulders, increasing his resemblance to a member of the Ice Mother's hierarchy.

As they came nearer and Arflane was able to hear the creak of the loading beam as it swung in the wind, he saw that Urquart's face was not quite without expression. There was a peculiar look of disappointment there, as well as a trace of anger.

The procession gradually came to a halt near the black hole in the ice. Snow pattered on the coffin and the wind caught their cloaks and ripped the hood from Ulrica Ulsenn's head. Arflane glimpsed her tear-streaked face as she pulled the fabric back into place. Manfred Rorsefnc, his broken arm in a sling beneath his cloak, turned to nod at Arflane. They got down from their sleighs and, with four of the male relatives, approached the coffin.

Manfred, helped by a boy of about fifteen, cut loose the black wolves and handed their harness to two servants who stood ready. Then, three men on either side, they pushed the heavy sleigh to the pit.

It balanced on the edge for a moment, as if in reluctance, then slid over and fell into the darkness. They heard it crash at the bottom; then they walked to the pile of ice blocks to throw them into the pit and seal it. But Urquart had already taken the first block in both hands, his harpoon for once lying on the ice where he had placed it. He lifted the block high and flung it down with great force, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his eyes full of fire. He paused, looking into the pit, wiping his hands on his greasy coat, then, picking up his harpoon, he walked away from the pit as Arflane and the others began to push the rest of the blocks towards it.

It took an hour to fill the pit and erect the flag bearing the Rorsefne arms. The flag fluttered in the wind. Gathered around it now were the mourners, their heads bowed as Manfred Rorsefne used his good hand to climb clumsily to the top of the heaped ice to begin the funeral oration.

"The Ice Mother's son returns to her cold womb," he began in the traditional way. "As she gave him life, she takes it; but he will exist now for eternity in the halls of ice where the Mother holds court. Imperishable, she rules the world. Imperishable are those who join her now. Imperishable she will make the world one thing, without age or movement; without desire or frustration; without anger or joy; perfect and whole and silent. Let us join her soon."

He had spoken well and clearly, with some emotion.

Arflane dropped to one knee and repeated the final sentence. "Let us join her soon."

Behind him, responding with less fervour, the others followed his example, muttering the words where he had spoken them boldly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rorsefne's Will

ARFLANE, POSSIBLY MORE than anyone, sensed the guilt that Ulrica Ulsenn felt over her father's death. Very little guilt, or indeed grief now, showed on her features but her manner was at once remote and tense. It was at her instigation, as well as Manfred's, that the disastrous expedition had set off on the very day that her father had died.

Arflane realised that she was not to blame for thinking him almost completely recovered; in fact there seemed no logical reason why he should have weakened so rapidly. It appeared that his heart, always considered healthy, had given out soon after he had dictated a will which was to

be read later that afternoon to Arflane and the close relatives. Pyotr Rorsefne had died at about the same time that the whale had attacked and destroyed the yacht, a few hours after he had spoken to Arflane of New York.

Sitting stiffly upright in a chair, hands clasped in her lap, Ulrica Ulsenn waited with Arflane, Manfred Rorsefne and her husband, who lay on a raised stretcher, in the ante-room adjoining what had been her father's study. The room was small, its walls crowded with hunting trophies from Pyotr Rorsefne's youth. Arflane found unpleasant the musty smell that came from the heads of the beasts.

The door of the study opened and Strom, the wizened old man who had been Pyotr Rorsefne's general retainer, beckoned them wordlessly into the room.

Arflane and Manfred Rorsefne stooped to pick up Ulsenn's stretcher and followed Ulrica Ulsenn into the study.

The study was reminiscent of a ship's cabin, though the light came from dim lighting strips instead of portholes. Its walls were lined from floor to ceiling with lockers. A large desk of yellow ivory stood in the centre; on it rested a single sheet of thin plastic. The sheet was large and covered in brown writing, as if it had been inscribed in blood. It curled at the ends; evidently it had been unrolled only recently.

The old man took Manfred Rorsefne to the desk and sat him down in front of the paper; then he left the room.

Manfred sighed and tapped his fingers on the desk as he read the will. Normally Janek Ulsenn should have fulfilled this function, but the fever which had followed his accident had left him weak and only now was he pushing himself into a sitting position so that he could look over the top of the desk and regard his wife's cousin through baleful, disturbed eyes.

"What does it say?" he asked, weakly but impatiently.

"Little that we did not expect," Manfred told him, still reading. There was a slight smile on his lips now.

"Why's this man here?" Ulsenn motioned with his hand towards Arflane.

"He is mentioned in the will, cousin."

Arflane glanced over Ulsenn's head at Ulrica, but she refused to look in his direction.

"Read it out," said Ulsenn, sinking back on to one arm. "Read it out, Manfred."

Manfred shrugged and began to read.

"The Will of Pyotr Rorsecne, Chief Ship Lord of Friesgalt," he began. "The Rorsefne is dead. The Ulsenn rules," he glanced sardonically at the reclining figure. "Save all my fortune and estates and ships, which I hereby will to be divided equally between my daughter and my nephew. I hereby present the command of my schooner, the *Ice Spirit*, to Captain Konrad Arflane of Brershill, so that he may take her to New York on the course charted on the maps I also leave to him. If Captain Arflane should find the city of New York and live to return to Friesgalt, he shall become whole owner of the *Ice Spirit*, and any cargo she may then carry. To benefit from my will, my daughter Ulrica and my nephew Manfred must accompany Captain Arflane upon his voyage. Captain Arflane shall have complete power over all who sail with him. Pyotr Rorsefne of Friesgalt."

Ulsenn was raising himself to a sitting position again. He glowered at Arflane. "The old man was full of fever. He was insane. Forget this condition. Dismiss Captain Arflane, divide the property as the will stipulates. Would you embark upon another crazy voyage so soon after the first? Be warned; the first voyage anticipates the second, should you take it!"

"By the Ice Mother, cousin, how superstitious you have become," Manfred Rorsefne murmured. "You know very well that should we ignore one part of the will, then the other becomes invalid. And think how you would benefit if we did perish! Your wife's share and mine would make you the most powerful man ever to have ruled in all the Eight Cities."

"I care nothing for the wealth. I am wealthy enough. It is my wife I wish to protect!"

Again Manfred Rorsefne smiled cynically and reminiscently, plainly remembering Ulsenn's desertion of his wife aboard the yacht. Ulsenn scowled at him then relapsed, gasping, onto his pillows.

Stony-faced, Ulrica rose. "He had best be taken to his bed," she said.

Arflane and Manfred picked up the stretcher between them. Ulrica led the way through dark passages to Ulsenn's bedroom, where servants took him and helped him into the large bed. His face was white with pain and he was almost fainting, but he continued to mutter about the stupidity of the old man's will.

"I wonder if he will decide to accompany us when we sail," Manfred said as they left. He smiled ironically. "Probably he will find his health and his duties as the new lord will keep him in the crevasse."

The three of them walked back to one of the main living rooms. It was furnished with brightly painted wall hangings and chairs and couches of wood and fibreglass frames padded and covered in animal skins. Arflane threw himself on to one of the couches and Ulrica sat opposite him, her eyes downcast. Only her long-fingered hands moved slightly in her lap.

Manfred did not sit.

"I must go to proclaim my uncle's will—or rather most of it," he said. He had to go to the top of the crevasse city and use a megaphone to repeat the words of the will to all the citizens. Fricsgalt was mourning Pyotr Rorsefne's death in the traditional way. All work had ceased and the citizens had retired to their cavern homes for the three days of mourning.

When Manfred left Ulrica did not, as Arflane had expected, make some excuse to follow. Instead she ordered a servant to bring them some hot *hess*. "You will have some, captain?" she asked faintly.

Arflane nodded, looking at her curiously. She got up and moved about the room for a moment, pretending to inspect scenes on the wall hangings; they must have been more than familiar to her.

Arflane said at length, "You should not feel that you did any wrong, Lady Ulsenn."

She turned, raising her eyebrows. "Wrong? What do you mean?"

"You did not desert your father. We all thought he was

completely recovered. He said so himself. You are not guilty."

"Thank you," she said. She bowed her head, a trace of irony in her tone. "I was not aware that I felt guilt."

"I'm sorry that I should have thought so," he said.

When she next looked at him, it was with a more candid expression as she studied his face. Gradually a look of despair and quiet agony came into her eyes.

He rose awkwardly and went towards her, taking her hands in his, holding them firmly.

"You are strong, Captain Arflane," she murmured. "I am weak."

"Not so," he said heavily. "Not so, ma'am."

She gently removed her hands from his and went to sit on a couch. The servant returned, placed the *hess* on a small table near the couch and left again. She reached forward and poured a goblet of the stuff, handing it up to him. He took it, standing over her with his legs slightly apart, looking down at her sympathetically.

"I was thinking that there is much of your father in you," he said. "The strength is there."

"You did not know my father well," she reminded him quietly.

"Well enough, I think. You forget that I saw him when he thought he was alone and dying. It was what I felt was in him, then, that I see in you now. I would not have saved his life if I had not seen that quality."

She gave a great sigh and her golden eyes glistened with tears. "Perhaps you were wrong," she said.

He sat beside her on the couch, shaking his head. "All the strength of the family went into you for this generation. Your weakness is probably his, too."

"What weakness?"

"A wild imagination. It took him to New York—or so he said—and it took you on the whale hunt."

She smiled gratefully, her features softening as she looked directly at him. "If you are trying to comfort me, captain, I think you are succeeding."

"I'd comfort you more if you'd give me the chance." He had not meant to speak. He had not meant to take her hands again as he did; but she did not resist and though

her expression became serious and thoughtful, she did not seem offended.

Now Arflane breathed rapidly, remembering when he had embraced her on the ice ; and her breasts were rising and falling also. She flushed, but still she let him grip her hands.

"I love you," said Arflane, almost miserably.

Then she burst into tears, took her hands away, and flung herself against him. He held her tightly while she wept, stroking her long, fine hair, kissing her forehead, caressing her shoulders. He felt the tears in his own eyes as he responded to her grief. Only barely aware of what he did next, he picked her up in his arms and carried her from the room. The passages were deserted as he took her towards her bedroom where he still believed he intended to lie her on the bed and let her sleep. He kicked open the door—it was across the corridor from Ulsenn's—and kicked it shut behind him when he had entered.

The room was furnished with chairs, lockers and dressing table of softly tinted ivory. White furs were heaped on the wide bed and also lined the walls.

He stooped and placed her on the bed, but he did not straighten up.

Now he knew that, in spite of the dreadful guilt he felt, he could do nothing to control his actions. He kissed her mouth. Her arms went around his neck as she responded, and he lowered his massive body on to hers, feeling the warmth and the contours of her flesh through the fabric of the dress ; feeling her writhe and tremble beneath him like a delicate, frightened bird. With one hand he pushed the dress higher and she tried to stop him, clinging to his hand and moaning ; but he continued, savagely now, to push his hand through the folds of her clothing until he found her flesh and his goal.

Then she shuddered under his touch and whimpered that she was a virgin, that she had never allowed Janek to consummate their marriage. This did not stop him. Fiercely he took her, reddening the white fur with her blood ; and then they lay panting side by side, to turn eventually again to each other, as they were to turn several times through that night.

CHAPTER NINE

Ulrica Ulsenn's Conscience

EARLY IN THE morning, looking down on her as she slept with her face just visible above the furs and her black hair spread out on the pillow, Arflanc felt remorse. No remorse, he knew, would be sufficient to make him part with Ulrica now, but he had broken the law he respected; the law he regarded as just and vital to the existence of his world. This morning he saw himself as a hypocrite, as a deceiver, and as a thief. While he was reconciled to these new rôles, the fact that he had assumed them depressed him; and he was further depressed by the knowledge that he had taken advantage of the woman's vulnerability at a time when her own guilt and grief had combined to weaken her moral strength.

Arflane did not regret his actions. He considered regret a useless emotion. What was done was done, and now he must decide what to do next.

He sighed as he clothed himself, unwilling to leave her but aware of what the law would do to her if she were discovered as an adulteress. At worst, she would be exposed on the ice to die. At the very least both he and she would be ostracised in all the Eight Cities; this in itself was effectually a lingering death sentence.

She opened her eyes and smiled at him sweetly; then the smile faltered.

"I'm leaving," he whispered. "We'll talk later."

She sat up in the bed, the furs falling away from her breasts. He bent forward to kiss her, gently pulling her arms from his neck as she tried to embrace him.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know. I'd thought of going away—to Brershill."

"Janek would break your city apart to find us. Many would die."

"I know. Would he divorce you?"

"He owns me because I have the highest rank of any woman in Friesgalt; because I am beautiful and well mannered and rich." She shrugged. "He is not particularly interested in demanding his rights. He would divorce me because I refused to entertain his guests, not because I refused to make love to him."

"Then what can we do? I have no intention of deceiving him for any longer than I must to protect you. I doubt in any case if I would be able to deceive him for long."

She nodded. "I doubt it, also." She smiled up at him again. "But if you took me away, where could we go?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. To New York, perhaps. Remember the will?"

"Yes—New York."

"We will talk later today, when we have an opportunity," he said. "I must go before the servants come."

It had not occurred to either of them to question the fact that she was Janek Ulsenn's property, no matter how little he deserved her; but now, as he made to leave, she grasped his arm and spoke earnestly.

"I am yours," she said. "I am rightfully yours, despite my marriage vows. Remember that."

He muttered something and went to the door, opening it cautiously and slipping out into the corridor.

From Ulsenn's room, as Arflane passed it, there came a groan of pain as the new Lord of Friesgalt turned in his bed and twisted his useless legs.

At breakfast, they were as shy as ever of exchanging glances. They sat at opposite ends of the table, with Manfred Rorsefne between them. His arm was still strapped in splints to his chest, but he appeared to be in as light-hearted a mood as ever.

"I gather my uncle already told you he wanted you to command the *Ice Spirit* and take her to New York?" he said to Arflane.

Arflane nodded.

"And did you agree?" Manfred asked.

"I half agreed," Arflane replied, pretending a greater

interest in his meal than he felt, resentful of Manfred's presence in the room.

"What do you say now?"

"I'll skipper the ship," Arflane said. "She'll take time to crew and provision. She may need to be refitted. Also I'll want a careful look at those charts."

"I'll get them for you," Manfred promised. He glanced sideways at Ulrica. "How do you feel about the proposed voyage, cousin?"

She flushed. "It was my father's wish," she said flatly.

"Good." Manfred sat back in his chair, evidently in no hurry to leave. Arflane resisted the temptation to frown.

He tried to prolong the meal, hoping that Manfred would lose patience, but finally he was forced to let the servants take away his plate. Manfred made light conversation, seemingly oblivious of Arflane's reluctance to talk to him. At length, evidently unable to bear this, Ulrica got up from the table and left the room. Arflane controlled his desire to follow her immediately.

Almost as soon as she had gone, Manfred Rorsefne pushed back his chair and stood up. "Wait here, captain. I'll bring the charts."

Arflane wondered if Manfred guessed anything of what had happened during the night. He was almost sure that, if he did guess, the young man would say nothing to Janek Ulsenn, whom he despised. Yet three days before on the ice Manfred had restrained him from following Ulrica and had seemed resolved to make sure that Arflane would not interfere between Ulsenn and his wife. Arflane found the young man an enigma. At some times he seemed cynical and contemptuous of tradition; at others he seemed only anxious to preserve it.

Rorsefne returned with the maps tucked under his good arm. Arflane took them from him and spread them out on the table that had now been cleared of the remains of the meal.

The largest chart was drawn to the smallest scale, showing an area of several thousand miles. Superimposed on it in outline were what Arflane recognised as the buried continents of North and South America. Old Pyotr Rorsefne must have gone to considerable trouble with his charts, if

this were his work. Clearly marked was the plateau occupying what had once been the Matto Grosso territory and where the Eight Cities now lay ; also clearly marked, about two-thirds up the eastern coastline of the northern continent, was New York. From the Matto Grosso to New York a line had been drawn. In Rorsefne's hand writing were the words "Direct Course (Impossible)". A dotted line showed another route that roughly followed the ancient land masses, angling approximately N.W. by N. before swinging gradually to E. by N. This was marked "Likely Course". Here and there it had been corrected in a different coloured ink ; it was obvious that these were the changes made on the actual voyage, but there were only a few scribbled indications of what the ship had been avoiding. There were several references to ice-breaks, flaming mountains, barbarian cities, but no details of their precise positions.

"These charts were amended from memory," Manfred said. "The log and the original charts were lost in the wreck."

"Couldn't we look for the wreck?" Arflane asked.

"We could—but it would hardly be worth it. The ship broke up completely. Anything like the log or the charts would have been destroyed or buried by now."

Arflane spread the other charts out. They were of little help, merely giving a clearer idea of the region a few hundred miles beyond the plateau.

Arflane spoke rather petulantly. "All we know is where to look when we get there," he said. "And we know that it's possible to get there. We can follow this course and hope for the best—but I'd expected more detailed information. I wonder if the old man really did find New York?"

"We'll know in a few months, with any luck," Manfred said smiling.

"I'm still unhappy with the charts." Arflane began to roll up the big chart. "To risk men's lives—not to mention a woman's—on a voyage like that is only what we expect. But to risk them totally . . ."

"We'll have a better ship, a better crew—and a better captain than my uncle took." Manfred spoke reassuringly.

Arflane rolled up the other charts. "I'll pick every mem-

ber of my crew myself. I'll check every inch of rigging and every ounce of provisions we take aboard. It will be at least two weeks before we're ready to sail."

Manfred was about to speak when the door opened. Four servants walked in carrying Janek Ulsenn's stretcher. The new ruler of Friesgalt seemed in better health than he had been on the previous evening. He sat up in the stretcher.

"There you are, Manfred. Have you seen Strom this morning?"

Strom was Pyotr Rorsefne's old general retainer. Manfred shook his head. "I was in my uncle's quarters earlier. I didn't see him."

Ulsenn signalled abruptly for the servants to lower the stretcher to the floor. They did so carefully.

"Why were you in those quarters? They are mine now, you know." Ulsenn's haughty voice rose.

Manfred indicated the rolled charts on the table.

"I had to get these to show Captain Arflane. They are the charts we need to plan the *Ice Spirit's* voyage."

"You mean to follow the letter of the will, then?" Janek Ulsenn said acidly. "I still object to the venture. Pyotr Rorsefne was mad when he wrote the will, he has made a common foreign sailor one of his heirs! He might just as well have left his wealth to Urquart, who is, after all, his kin. I could declare the will void . . ."

Manfred pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. "You could not, cousin. Not the will of the old Lord. I have declared it publicly. Everyone will know if you do not adhere to its instructions . . ."

A thought occurred to Arflane. "You told the whole crevasse about New York? The old man didn't want the knowledge made general——"

"I didn't mention New York by name, but only as a 'distant city below the plateau,'" Manfred assured him.

Ulsenn smiled. "Then there you are. You merely sail to the most distant of the Eight Cities . . ."

Manfred sneered very slightly. "Below the plateau? Besides, if it were one of the Eight that the will referred to, then it would have been making what was virtually a declaration of war. Your pain clouds your intelligence, cousin."

Ulsenn coughed and glared up at Manfred. "You are impudent, Manfred. I am Lord now. I could order you both put to death . . ."

"With no trial? These are really empty threats, cousin. Would the people accept such an action?"

In spite of the great personal authority of the Chief Ship Lord the real power still rested in the hands of the mass of citizens, who had been known in the past to depose an unwelcome or tyrannical owner of the title. Ulsenn knew that he could not afford to take drastic action against any member of the much respected Rorsefne family. As it was, his own standing in the city was comparatively slight. He had risen to the title by marriage, not by direct blood line or by winning it by some other means. If he were to imprison Manfred or someone whom Manfred protected Ulsenn might easily find himself with a civil war on his hands, and he knew just what the result of such a war would be.

Ulsenn, therefore, remained silent.

"It is Pyotr Rorsefne's *will*, cousin," Manfred reminded him firmly. "Whatever you may feel about it, Captain Arflane commands the *Ice Spirit*. Don't worry. Ulrica and I will go along to represent the family."

Ulsenn darted a sharp, enigmatic look at Arflane. He signalled for his servants to pick up the stretcher. "If Ulrica goes—I will go!" The servants carried him from the room.

Arflane realised that Manfred Rorsefne was looking with amused interest at his face. The young man must have read the expression there. Arflane had not been prepared for Ulsenn's declaration. He had been confident that Ulsenn would have been too involved with his new power, too ill and too cowardly to join the expedition. He had been confident in his anticipation of Ulrica's company on the proposed voyage. Now he could anticipate nothing.

Manfred laughed.

"Cheer up, captain. Janek won't bother us on the voyage. He's an accountant, a stay-at-home merchant who knows nothing of sailing. He could not interfere if he wished to. He won't help us find the Ice Mother's lair—but he won't hinder us, either."

Although Manfred's reassurance seemed genuine, Arflanc still could not tell if the young man had actually guessed the real reason for his disappointment. For that matter, he wondered if Janek Ulsenn had guessed what had happened in his wife's bedroom that night. The look he had given Arflane seemed to indicate that he suspected something, though it seemed impossible that he could know what had actually taken place.

Arflane was disturbed by the turn of events. He wanted to see Ulrica at once and talk to her about what had happened. He had a sudden feeling of deep apprehension.

"When will you begin inspecting the ship and picking the crew, captain?" Manfred was asking him.

"Tomorrow," Arflane told him ungraciously. "I'll see you before I get out there."

He made a curt farewell gesture with his hand and left the room. He began to walk through the low corridors, searching for Ulrica.

He found her in the main livingroom, where on the previous night, he had first caressed her. She rose hurriedly when he entered. She was pale; she held her body rigidly, her hands gripped tightly together at her waist. She had bound up her hair, drawing it back tightly from her face. She was wearing the black dress of fine sealskin which she had worn the day before at the funeral. Arflane closed the door, but she moved towards it, attempting to pass him. He barred the way with one arm and tried to look into her eyes, but she averted her head.

"Ulrica, what is it?" The sense of foreboding was now even stronger. "What is it? Did you hear that your husband intends to come with us on the voyage? Is that why . . . ?"

She looked at him coolly and he dropped his arm away from the door.

"I am sorry, Captain Arflane," she said formally. "But it would be best if you forgot what passed between us. We were both in unusual states of mind. I realise now that it is my duty to remain faithful to my——"

Her whole manner was artificially polite.

"Ulrica!" He gripped her shoulders tightly. "Did he tell you to say this? Has he threatened you . . . ?"

She shook her head. "Let me go, captain."

"Ulrica . . ." His voice had broken. He spoke weakly, dropping his hands from her shoulders. "Ulrica, why . . . ?"

"I seem to remember you speaking quite passionately in favour of the old traditions," she said. "More than once I've heard you say that to let slip our code will mean our perishing as a people. You mentioned that you admired my father's strength of mind and that you saw the same quality in me. Perhaps you did, captain. I intend to stay faithful to my husband."

"You aren't saying what you mean. I can tell that. You love me. This mood is just a reaction—because things seem too complicated now. You told me that you were rightfully mine. You *meant* what you said this morning." He hated the tone of desperation in his own voice, but he could not control it.

"I mean what I am saying now, captain; and if you respect the old way of life, then you will respect my request that you see as little of me as possible from now on."

"No!" He roared in anger and lurched towards her. She stepped back, face frozen and eyes cold. He reached out to touch her and then slowly withdrew his hands and stepped aside to let her pass.

She opened the door. He understood now that it was no outside event that had caused this change in her, but her own conscience. He could not argue with her decision. Morally, it was right. There was nothing he could do; there was no hope he could hold. He watched her walk slowly away from him down the corridor. Then he slammed the door, his face twisted in an expression of agonised despair. There was a snapping sound and the door swung back. He had broken its lock. It would no longer close properly.

He hurried to his room and began to bundle his belongings together. He would make sure that he obeyed her request. He would not see her again, at least until the ship was ready to sail. He would go out to the *Ice Spirit* at once and begin his work.

He slung the sack over his shoulders and hurried through the winding corridors to the outer entrance. Bloody thoughts were in his mind and he wanted to get into the

open, hoping that the clean air of the surface would blow them away.

As he reached the outer door, he met Manfred Rorsefne in the hall. The young man looked amused.

"Where are you off to, captain?"

Arflane glared at him, wanting to strangle the supercilious expression from Rorsefne's face.

"I see you're leaving, captain. Off to the *Ice Spirit* so soon? I thought you were going tomorrow . . ."

"Today," Arflane growled. He recovered some of his self-assurance. "Today. I'll get started at once. I'll sleep on board until we sail. It will be best . . ."

"Perhaps it will," Rorsefne agreed, speaking half to himself as he watched the big, red-bearded sailor stride rapidly from the house.

CHAPTER TEN

Konrad Arflane's Mood

OF THE NEWLY discovered facts about his own character that obsessed Konrad Arflane, the most startling was that he had never suspected himself capable of renouncing all his principles in order to possess another man's wife. He also found it difficult to equate with his own idea of himself the knowledge that, having been stopped from seeing the woman, he should not become reconciled, or indeed grateful.

He was far from being either. He slept badly, his attention turned constantly to thoughts of Ulrica Ulsenn. He waited without hope for her to come to him and when she did not he was angry. He stalked about the big ship, bawling out the men over quibbling details, dismissing hands he had hired the day before, muttering offensively to his officers in front of the men, demanding that he should be

made aware of all problems aboard, then swearing furiously when some unnecessary matter was brought to him.

He had had the reputation of being a particularly good skipper; stern and remote, but fair. The whaling hands, whom he preferred for his crewmen, had been eager to sign with the *Ice Spirit*, in spite of the mysterious voyage she was to make. Now many were regretting it.

Arflane had appointed three officers—or rather he had let two appointments stand and had signed on Long Lance Urquart as third officer, below Petchnyoff and old Kristoff Hinsen. Urquart seemed oblivious to Arflane's irrational moods, but the two other men were puzzled and upset by the change in their new skipper. Whenever Urquart was not in their quarters—which was often—they would take the opportunity to discuss the problem. Both had liked Arflane when they had first met him. Petchnyoff had had a high regard for his integrity and strength of will; Kristoff Hinsen felt a more intimate relationship with him, based on memories of the days when they had been rival skippers. Neither was capable of analysing the cause of the change in Arflane's temperament; yet so much did they trust their earlier impressions of him that they were prepared for a while to put up with his moods in the hope that, once under way, he would become once more the man they had first encountered. Petchnyoff's patience as the days passed became increasingly strained and he began to think of resigning his command, but Hinsen persuaded him to wait a little longer.

The huge vessel was being fitted with completely new canvas and rigging. Arflane personally inspected every pin, every knot, and every line. He climbed over the ship inch by inch, checking the set of the yards, the tension of the rigging, the snugness of the hatch covers, the feel of the bulkheads, until he was satisfied. He tested the wheel time after time, turning the runners this way and that to get to know their exact responses. Normally the steering runners and their turntable were immovably locked in relation with each other. On the foredeck though, immediately above the great gland of the steering pin, was housed the emergency bolt, with a heavy mallet secured beside it. Dropping the

bolt would release the skids, allowing them to turn in towards each other, creating in effect a huge ploughshare that dug into the ice, bringing the vessel to a squealing and frequently destructive halt. Arflane tested this apparatus for hours. He also dropped the heavy anchors once or twice. These were on either side of the ship, beneath her bilges. They consisted of two heavy blades. Above them, through guides let into the hull, rods reached to the upper deck. Pins driven through the rods kept the blades clear of ice ; beside each stanchion mallets were kept ready to knock the pegs clear in case of danger or emergency. The heavy anchors were seldom used, and never by a good skipper ; contact with racing ice would wear them rapidly away, and replacements were now nearly unobtainable.

At first men and officers had called out cheerfully to him as he went about the ship ; but they soon learned to avoid him, and the superstitious whaling hands began to speak of curses and of a foredoomed voyage ; yet very few disembarked of their own accord.

Arflane would watch moodily from the bridge as bale after bale, barrel after barrel of provisions were swung aboard, packing every inch of available space. With each fresh ton that was taken into the holds, he would again test the wheel and the heavy anchors to see how the *Ice Spirit* responded.

One day on deck Arflane saw Petchnyoff inspecting the work of a sailor who had been one of a party securing the mainmast ratlines. He strode up to the pair and pulled at the lines, checking the knots. One of them was not as firm as it could be.

"Call that a knot, do you, Mr. Petchnyoff?" he said offensively. "I thought you were supposed to be inspecting this work!"

"I am, sir."

"I'd like to be able to trust my officers," Arflane said with a sneer. "Try to see that I can in future."

He marched off along the deck. Petchnyoff slammed a belaying pin he had been holding down on to the deck, narrowly missing the surprised hand.

That evening, Petchnyoff had got half his kit packed before Hinsen could convince him to stay on board.

The weeks went by. There were four floggings for minor offences. It was as if Arflane were deliberately trying to get his crew to leave him before the ship set sail. Yet many of the men were fascinated by him and the fact that Urquart had thrown in his lot with Arflane must have had something to do with the whaling hands staying.

Manfred Rorsefne would occasionally come aboard to confer with Arflane. Originally Arflane had said that it would take a fortnight to ready the ship, but he had put off the sailing date further and further on one excuse and another, telling Rorsefne that he was still not happy that everything had been done that could be done, reminding him that a voyage of this kind demanded a ship that was as perfect as possible.

"True, but we'll miss the summer at this rate," Manfred Rorsefne reminded him gently. Arflane scowled in reply, saying he could sail in any weather. His carefulness on one hand, and his apparent recklessness on the other, did little to reassure Rorsefne ; but he said nothing.

Finally there was absolutely no more to be done aboard the ice schooner. She was in superb trim ; all her ivory was polished and shining, her decks were scrubbed and freshly boned. Her four masts gleamed with white, furled canvas ; her rigging was straight and taut ; the boats, swinging in davits fashioned from the jawbones of whales, hung true and firm ; every pin was in place and every piece of gear was where it should be. The barbaric whale skulls at her prow glared towards the north as if defying all the dangers that might be awaiting them. The *Ice Spirit* was ready to sail.

Still reluctant to send for his passengers, Arflane stood in silence on the bridge and looked at the ship. For a moment it occurred to him that he could take her out now, leaving the Ulsenns and Manfred Rorsefne behind. The ice ahead was obscured by clouds of snow that were lifted by the wind and sent drifting across the bow ; the sky was grey and heavy. Gripping the rail in his gauntleted hands, Arflane knew it would not be difficult to slip out to the open ice in weather like this.

He sighed and turned to Kristoff Hinsen who stood beside him.

"Send a man to the Rorsefne place, Mr. Hinsen. Tell them if the wind holds we'll sail tomorrow morning."

"Aye aye, sir." Hinsen paused, his weather-beaten features creased in doubt. "Tomorrow morning, sir?"

Arflane turned his brooding eyes on Hinsen. "I said tomorrow. That's the message, Mr. Hinsen."

"Aye aye, sir." Hinsen left the bridge hurriedly.

Arflane knew why Hinsen queried his orders. The weather was bad and obviously getting worse. By morning they would have a heavy snow storm; visibility would be poor, the men would find it difficult to set the canvas. But Arflane had made up his mind; he looked away, back towards the bow.

Two hours later he saw a covered sleigh being drawn across the ice from the city. Tawny wolves pulled it, their paws slipping on the ice.

A strong gust of wind blew suddenly from the west and buffeted the side of the ship so that it moved slightly to starboard in its mooring cables. Arflane did not need to order the cables checked. Several hands instantly ran to see to them. It was a larger crew than he normally liked to handle, but he had to admit, even in his poor temper, that their discipline was very good.

The wolves came to an untidy stop close to the ship's side. Arflane cursed and swung down from the bridge, moving to the rail and leaning over it. The driver had brought the carriage in too close for his own safety.

"Get that thing back!" Arflane yelled. "Get beyond the mooring pegs. Don't you know better than to come so close to a ship of this size while there's a heavy wind blowing? If we slip one cable you'll be crushed!"

A muffled head poked itself from the carriage window. "We are here, Captain Arflane. Manfred Rorsefne and the Ulseens."

"Tell your driver to get back! He ought to—" A fresh gust of wind slammed against the ship's side and sent it skidding several feet closer to the carriage until the slack of the mooring cables on the other side was taken up. The driver looked startled and whipped his wolves into a steep

turn. They strained in their harness and loped across the ice with the carriage in tow.

Arflane smiled unpleasantly.

With a wind as erratic as this few captains would allow their ships out of their moorings, but he intended to sail anyway. It might be dangerous, but it would seem worse to Ulsenn and his relatives.

Manfred Rorsefne and the Ulsenns had got out of the carriage and were standing uncertainly, looking up at the ship, searching for Arflane.

Arflane turned away from them and went back to the bridge.

Fydur, the ship's bosun, saluted him as he began to climb the companionway. "Shall I send out a party to take the passengers aboard, sir?"

Arflane shook his head. "Let them make their own way on board," he told the bosun. "You can lower a gangplank if you like."

A little later he watched Janek Ulsenn being helped up the gangplank and along the deck. He saw Ulriea, completely swathed in her furs, moving beside her husband. Once she looked up at the bridge and he caught a glimpse of her eyes—the only part of her face not hidden by her hood. Manfred strolled along after them, waving cheerfully up at Arflane, but he was forced to clutch at a line as the ship moved again in her moorings.

Within a quarter of an hour he had joined Arflane on the bridge.

"I've seen my cousin and her husband into their respective cabins, captain," he said. "I'm settled in myself. At last we're ready, eh?"

Arflane grunted and moved down the rail to starboard, plainly trying to avoid the young man. Manfred seemed unaware of this; he followed, slapping his gloved hands together and looking about him. "You certainly know your ships, captain. I thought the *Spirit* was as neat as she could be until you took over. We should have little trouble on the voyage, I'm sure."

Arflane looked round at Rorsefne.

"We should have no trouble at all," he said grimly. "I hope you'll remind your relatives that I'm in sole command of this ship from the moment she sails. I'm em-

powered to take any measures I think fit to ensure the smooth running of the vessel . . ."

"All this is unnecessary, captain." Rorsefne smiled. "We accept that, of course. That is the law of the ice. No need for details; you are the skipper, we do as you tell us to do."

Arflane grunted. "Are you certain Janek Ulsenn understands that?"

"I'm sure he does. He'll do nothing to offend you—save perhaps scowl at you a little. Besides, his legs are still bothering him. He's not entirely fit; I doubt if he'll be seen above deck for a while." Manfred paused and then stepped much closer to Arflane. "Captain—you haven't seemed yourself since you took this command. Is something wrong? Are you disturbed by the idea of the voyage? It occurred to me that you might think there was—um—sacrilege involved."

Arflane shook his head, looking full into Manfred Rorsefne's face. "You know I don't think that."

Rorsefne appeared to be disconcerted for a moment. He pursed his lips. "It's no wish of mine to intrude on your personal . . ."

"Thank you."

"It would seem to me that the safety of the ship depends almost wholly upon yourself. If you are in poor spirits, captain, perhaps it would be better to delay the voyage longer?"

The wind was whining through the top trees, Automatically, Arflane looked up to make sure that the yards were firm. "I'm not in poor spirits," he said distantly.

"I think I could help . . ."

Arflane raised the megaphone to his lips and bawled at Hinsen as he crossed the quarter deck.

"Mr. Hinsen! Get some men into the mizzen to'g'lnt yards and secure that flapping canvas!"

Manfred Rorsefne said nothing more. He left the bridge.

Arflane folded his arms across his chest, his features set in a scowl.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Under Sail

AT DAWN THE next morning a blizzard blew in a great white sheet across the city and the forest of ships, heaping snow on the decks of the *Ice Spirit* till the schooner strained at her anchor lines. Sky and land were indistinguishable and only occasionally were the masts of the other vessels to be seen, outlined in black against the sweeping wall of snow. The temperature had fallen below zero. Ice had formed on the rigging and in the folds of the sails. Particles of ice, whipped by the wind, flew in the air like bullets; it was almost impossible to move against the blustering pressure of the storm. Loose canvas flapped like the broken flippers of seals; the wind shrilled and moaned through the tall masts and boats swung and creaked in their davits.

As a muffled tolling proclaimed two bells in the morning watch, Konrad Arflane, wearing a bandage over his mouth and nose and a snow visor over his eyes, stepped from his cabin below the bridge. Through a mist of driving snow he made his way forward to the bow and peered ahead; it was impossible to see anything in the swirling wall of whiteness. He returned to his cabin, passing Petchnyoff, the officer of the watch, without a word.

Petchnyoff stared after his skipper as the door of the cabin closed. There was a strange, resentful look in the first officer's eyes.

By six thirty in the morning, as the bell rang five, the driving snow had eased and weak sunshine was filtering through the clouds. Hinsen stood beside Arflane on the bridge, a megaphone in his hand. The crew were climbing into the shrouds, their thickly-clad bodies moving slowly up the ratlines. On the deck by the mainmast stood Urquart, his head covered by a tall hood, in charge of the men in the yards. The anchor men stood by their mooring lines watching the bridge and ready to let go.

Arflane glanced at Hinsen. "All ready, Mr. Hinsen?"
Hinsen nodded.

Aware that Rorsefne and the Ulsenns were still sleeping below, Arflane said, "Let go the anchor lines."

"Let go the anchor lines!" Hinsen's voice boomed over the ship and the men sprang to release the cables. The taut lines whipped away and the schooner lurched forward.

"Set upper and lower fore to'g'l'nts."

The order was repeated and obeyed.

"Set stays'l's."

The staysails blossomed out.

"Set upper and lower main to'g'l'nts and upper tops'l."

The sails billowed and swelled as they caught the wind, curving like the wings of monstrous birds, pulling the ship gradually away. Snow sprayed as the runners sliced through the surface and the schooner began to move from the port, passing the still anchored ships near her, dipping her bowsprit as she descended a slight incline in the ice, surging as she felt the rise on the other side. Kites squawked, swooping and circling excitedly around the top trees where the grandiose standard of the Rorsefne stood straight in the breeze. In her wake the ship left deep twin scars in the churned snow and ice. A huge, graceful creature, making her stately way out of port in the early morning under only a fraction of her sail, the ice in the rigging melting and falling off like a shower of diamonds, the *Ice Spirit* left Friesgalt behind and moved north beneath the lowering sky.

"All plain sail, Mr. Hinsen."

Sheet by sheet the sails were set until the ship sped over the ice under full canvas. Hinsen glanced at Arflane questioningly; it was unusual to set so much canvas while leaving port. But then he noticed Arflane's face as the ship began to gain speed. The captain was relaxing visibly. His expression was softening, there seemed to be a trace of a smile on his lips and his eyes were beginning to brighten.

Arflane breathed heavily and pushed back his visor, exhilarated by the wind on his face, the rolling of the deck beneath his feet. For the first time since Ulrica Ulsenn had rejected him he felt a lifting of the weight that had

descended on him. He half smiled at Hinsen. "She's a real ship, Mr. Hinsen."

Old Kristoff, overjoyed at the change in his master, grinned broadly, more in relief than in agreement. "Aye, sir. She can move."

Arflane stretched his body as the ship lunged forward over the seemingly endless plateau of ice, piercing the thinning curtain of snow. Below him on the decks, and above in the rigging, sailors moved like dark ghosts through the drifting whiteness, working under the calm, fixed eye of Long Lance Urquart as he strode up and down the deck, his harpoon resting in its usual place in the crook of his arm. Sometimes Urquart would jump up into the lower shrouds to help a man in difficulties with a piece of tackle. The cold and the snow, combined with the need to wear particularly thick gloves, made it difficult for even the whalers to work, though they were better used to the conditions than merchant sailors.

Arflane had hardly spoken to Urquart since the man had come aboard to sign on. Arflane had been happy to accept the harpooner, offering him the berth of third officer. It had vaguely occurred to him to wonder why Urquart should want to sail with him, since the tall harpooner could have no idea of where the ship was bound; but his own obsessions had driven the question out of his head. Now, as he relaxed, he glanced curiously at Urquart. The man caught his eye as he turned from giving instructions to a sailor. He nodded gravely to Arflane.

Arflane had instinctively trusted Urquart's ability to command, knowing that the harpooner had great prestige amongst the whalers; he had no doubts about his decision, but now he wondered again why Urquart had joined the ship. He had come, uninvited, on the whale hunt. That was understandable maybe; but there was no logical reason why a professional harpooner should wish to sail on a mysterious voyage of exploration. Perhaps Urquart felt protective towards his dead father's daughter and nephew, had decided to come with them to be sure of their safety on the trip; the image of the Long Lance at old Rorsefne's graveside suddenly came back to Arflane. Perhaps though Urquart felt friendship towards him personally. After all, only Urquart had seemed instinctively to respect Arflane's

troubled state of mind over the past weeks and to understand his need for solitude. Of all the ship's complement, Arflane felt comradeship only towards Urquart, who was still a stranger to him. Hinsen he liked and admired, but since their original disagreement on the *Ice Spirit* over two months earlier, he had not been able to feel quite the same warmth towards him as he might have done otherwise.

Arflane leaned on the rail, watching the men at work. The ship was in no real danger until she had to descend the plateau and they would not reach the edge for several days sailing at full speed ; he gave himself the pleasure of forgetting everything but the motion of the ship beneath him, the sight of the snow-spray spurting from the runners, the long streamers of clouds above him breaking up now and letting through the early morning sunlight and glimpses of a pale red and yellow sky that had begun to be reflected by the ice.

There was an old saying amongst sailors that a ship beneath a man was as good as a woman, and Arflane began to feel that he could agree. Once the schooner had got under way, his mood had lifted. He was still concerned about Ulrica ; but he did not feel the same despair, the same hatred for all humanity that had possessed him while the ship was being readied for the voyage. He began to feel guilty, now that he thought back, that he had been so ill-mannered towards his officers and so irrational in his dealings with the crew. Manfred Rorsefne had been concerned that his mood would continue. Arflane had rejected the idea that he was in any kind of abnormal mood, but now he realised the truth of Rorsefne's statement of the night before ; he would have been in no state to command the ship if his temper had not changed. It puzzled him that mere physical sensation, like the ship's passage over the ice, could so alter a man's mental attitudes within the space of an hour. Admittedly in the past he had always been restless and ill-tempered when not on board ship, but he had never gone so far as to behave unfairly towards the men serving under him. His self-possession was his pride. He had lost it ; now he had found it again.

Perhaps he did not realise at that point that it would take only a glimpse or two of Ulrica Ulsenn to make him

once more lose that self-possession in a different way. Even when he looked round to see Janek Ulsenn being helped up to the bridge by Petchnyoff, his spirits were unimpaired ; he smiled at Ulsenn in sardonic good humour.

"Well, we're under way, Lord Ulsenn. Hope we didn't wake you."

Petchnyoff looked surprised. He had become so used to the skipper's surly manner that any sign of joviality was bound to set him aback.

"You did wake us," Ulsenn began, but Arflane interrupted him to address Petchnyoff.

"You took the middle watch and half the morning watch, I believe, Mr. Petchnyoff."

Petchnyoff nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I would have thought it would have suited you to be in your bunk by now," Arflane said as pleasantly as he could. He did not want an officer who was going to be half-asleep when his watch came round again.

Petchnyoff shrugged. "I'd planned to get some rest in, sir, after I'd eaten. Then I met Lord Ulsenn coming out of his cabin . . ."

Arflane gestured with his hand. "I see. You'd better go to your bunk now, Mr. Petchnyoff."

"Aye aye, sir."

Petchnyoff backed down the companionway and disappeared. Ulsenn was left alone. Arflane had deliberately ignored him and Ulsenn was aware of it ; he stared balefully at Arflane.

"You may have complete command of this ship, captain, but it would seem to me that you could show courtesy both to your officers and your passengers. Petchnyoff has told me how you have behaved since you took charge. Your boorishness is a watchword in all Friesgalt. Because you have been given a responsibility that elevates you above your fellows, it is no excuse for taking the opportunity to . . ."

Arflane sighed. "I have made sure that the ship is in the best possible order, if that's what Petchnyoff means," he commented reasonably. He was surprised that Petchnyoff should show such disloyalty ; but perhaps the man's ties were, after all, closer to the ruling class of Friesgalt than

to a foreign skipper. His own surliness over the past weeks must in any case have helped turn Petehnyoff against him. He shrugged. If the first officer was offended then he could remain so, as long as he performed his duties efficiently.

Ulsenn had seen the slight shrug and misinterpreted it. "You are not aware of what your men are saying about you, captain?"

Arflane leaned casually with his back against the rail, pretending an interest with the racing ice to starboard. "The men always grumble about the skipper. It's the extent of their grumbling and how it affects their work that's the thing to worry about. I've hired whaling men for this voyage, Lord Ulsenn—wild whaling men. I'd expect them to complain."

"They're saying that you carry a curse," Ulsenn murmured, looking cunningly at Arflane.

Arflane laughed. "They're a superstitious lot. It gives them satisfaction to believe in curses. They wouldn't follow a skipper unless they could colour his character in some way. It appeals to their sense of drama. Calm down, Lord Ulsenn. Go back to your cabin and rest your legs."

Ulsenn's lean face twitched in anger. "You are an impudent boor, captain!"

"I am also adamant, Lord Ulsenn. I'm in full command of this expedition and any attempt to oust my authority will be dealt with in the normal manner." Arflane relished the opportunity to threaten the man. "Have the goodness to leave the bridge!"

"What if the officers and crew aren't satisfied with your command? What if they feel you are mishandling the ship?" Ulsenn leant forward, his voice high-pitched.

Having so recently regained his own self-control, Arflane felt a somewhat ignoble enjoyment in witnessing Ulsenn losing his. He smiled again. "Calm yourself, my lord. There is an accepted procedure they may take if they are dissatisfied with my command. They could mutiny, which would be unwise; or they could vote for a temporary commander and appeal to me to relinquish my post. In which case they must abandon the expedition, return immediately to a friendly city and make a formal report." Arflane gestured impatiently. "Really, sir, you must accept my

command once and for all. Our journey will be a long one and conflicts of this kind are best avoided."

"You have produced the conflict, captain."

Arflane shrugged in contempt and did not bother to reply.

"I reserve the right to countermand your orders if I feel they are not in keeping with the best interests of this expedition," Ulsenn continued.

"And I reserve the right, sir, to hang you if you try. I'll have to warn the crew that they're to accept only my orders. That would embarrass you, I think."

Ulsenn snorted. "You're aware, surely, that most of your crew, including your officers, are Friesgaltians? I am the man they will listen to before they take such orders from—a foreign—"

"Possibly," Arflane said equably. "In which case, my rights as commander of this ship entitle me, as I believe I've pointed out, to punish any attempt to usurp my authority, whether in word or deed."

"You know your rights, captain," Ulsenn retaliated with attempted sarcasm, "but they are artificial. Mine are the rights of blood—to command the men of Friesgalt."

Beside Arflane, Hinsen chuckled. The sound was totally unexpected; both men turned to stare. Hinsen looked away, covering his mouth a trifle ostentatiously with one gloved hand.

The interruption had, however, produced its effect. Ulsenn was completely deflated. Arflane moved forward and took his arm, helping him towards the companionway.

"Possibly all our rights are artificial, Lord Ulsenn, but mine are designed to keep discipline on a ship and make sure that it is run as smoothly as possible."

Ulsenn began to clamber down the companionway. Arflane motioned Hinsen forward to help him; but, when the older man attempted to take his arm, Ulsenn shook him off and made something of a show of controlling his pain as he limped unaided across the deck.

Hinsen grinned at Arflane. The captain pursed his lips in disapproval. The sky was lightening now, turning to a bright, pale blue that reflected in the flat ice to either side, as the last shreds of clouds disappeared.

The ship moved smoothly, sharply outlined against a

mirror amalgam of sky and sea. Looking forward Arflane saw the men relaxing, gathering in knots and groups on the deck. Through them, moving purposefully, Urquart was shouldering his way towards the bridge.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Over the Edge

VAGUELY SURPRISED, ARFLANE watched the harpooner climb to the poop. Perhaps Urquart sensed that his mood had changed now and that he would be ready to see him. The harpooner nodded curtly to Hinsen and presented himself before Arflane, stamping the butt of his great weapon down on the deck and leaning on it broodingly. He pushed back the hood of his coat, revealing his heap of matted black hair. The clear blue eyes regarded Arflane steadily; the gaunt, red face was as immobile as ever. From him came a faint stink of whale blood and blubber.

"Well, sir." His voice was harsh but low. "We are under way." There was a note of expectancy in his tone.

"You want to know where we're bound, Mr. Urquart?" Arflane said on impulse. "We're bound for New York."

Hinsen, standing behind Urquart, raised his eyebrows in surprise. "New York!"

"This is confidential," Arflane warned him. "I don't propose to tell the men just yet. Only the officers."

Over Urquart's grim features there spread a slow smile. When he spun his lance and drove it point first into the deck it seemed to be a gesture of approval. The smile quickly disappeared, but the blue eyes were brighter. "So we sail to the Ice Mother, captain." He did not question the existence of the mythical city; quite plainly he believed firmly in its reality. But Hinsen's old, rugged face bore a look of heavy scepticism.

"Why do we sail to New York, sir? Or is the voyage simply to discover if such a place does exist?"

Arflane, more absorbed in studying Urquart's reaction, answered abstractedly. "The Lord Pyotr Rorsefne discovered the city, but was forced to turn back before he could explore it. We have charts. I think the city exists."

"And the Ice Mother's in residence?" Hinsen could not avoid the hint of irony in his question.

"We'll know that when we get there, Mr. Hinsen." For a moment Arflane turned his full attention to his second officer.

"She'll be there," Urquart said with conviction.

Arflane looked curiously at the tall harpooner, then addressed Kristoff Hinsen again. "Remember, Mr. Hinsen, I've told you this in confidence."

"Aye, sir." Hinsen paused. Then he said tactfully, "I'll take a tour about the ship, sir, if Mr. Urquart wants a word with you. Better have someone keeping an eye on the men."

"Quite right, Mr. Hinsen. Thank you."

When Hinsen had left the bridge, the two men stood there in silence for a while, neither feeling the need to speak. Urquart wrested his harpoon from the deck and walked towards the rail. Arflane joined him.

"Happy with the voyage, Mr. Urquart?" he asked at length.

"Yes, sir."

"You really think we'll find the Ice Mother?"

"Don't you, captain?"

Arflane gestured uncertainly. "Three months ago, Mr. Urquart—three months ago I would have said yes, there would be evidence in New York to support the doctrine. Now . . ." He paused helplessly. "They say that the scientists have disproved the doctrine. The Ice Mother is dying."

Urquart shifted his weight. "Then she'll need our help, sir. Maybe that's why we're sailing. Maybe it's fate. Maybe she's calling for us."

"Maybe." Arflane sounded doubtful.

"I think so, captain. Pyotr Rorsefne was her messenger, you see. He was sent to you—that's why you found him on the ice—and when he had delivered his message to us, he died. Don't you see, sir?"

"It could be true," Arflane agreed.

Urquart's mysticism was disconcerting, even to Arflane. He looked directly at the harpooner and saw the fanaticism in the face, the utter conviction in the eyes. Not so long ago he had had a similar conviction. He shook his head sadly.

"I am not the man I was, Mr. Urquart."

"No, sir." Urquart seemed to share Arflane's sadness. "But you'll find yourself on this voyage. You'll recover your faith, sir."

Offended for the moment by the intimacy of Urquart's remark, Arflane drew back. "Perhaps I don't need that faith any more, Mr. Urquart."

"Perhaps you need it most of all now, captain."

Arflane's anger passed. "I wonder what has happened to me," he said thoughtfully. "Three months ago . . ."

"Three months ago you had not met the Rorsefne family, captain." Urquart spoke grimly, but with a certain sympathy. "You've become infected with their weakness."

"I understood you to feel a certain loyalty—a certain protective responsibility to the family," Arflane said in surprise. He realised that this understanding had been conjecture on his part, but he had been convinced that he was right.

"I want them kept alive, if that's what you mean," Urquart said non-committally.

"I'm not sure I understand you . . ." Arflane began, but was cut short by Urquart turning away from him and looking distantly towards the horizon.

The silence became uncomfortable and Arflane felt disturbed by the loss of Urquart's confidence. The half-savage harpooner did not elaborate on his remark, but eventually turned back to look at Arflane, his expression softening by a degree.

"It's the Ice Mother's will," he said. "You needed to use the family so that you could get the ship. Avoid our passengers all you can from now on, captain. They are weak. Even the old man was too indulgent, and he was better than any that still live . . ."

"You say it was the Ice Mother," Arflane replied gloomily. "But I think it was a different kind of force, just as mysterious, that involved me with the family."

"Think what you like," Urquart said impatiently, "but I

know what is true. I know your destiny. Avoid the Rorsefne family."

"What of Lord Ulsenn?"

"Ulsenn is nothing." Urquart sneered.

Impressed by Urquart's warning, Arflane was careful to say nothing more of the Rorsefne family. He had already noted how much involved with the three people he had become. Yet surely, he thought, there were certain strengths in all of them. They were not as soft as Urquart thought. Even Ulsenn, though a physical coward, had his own kind of integrity if it was only a belief in his absolute right to rule. It was true that his association with the family had caused him to forsake many of his old convictions, yet surely that was his weakness, not theirs? Urquart doubtless blamed their influence. Perhaps he was right.

He sighed and dusted at the rail with his gloved hand. "I hope we find the Ice Mother," he said eventually. "I need to be reassured, Mr. Urquart."

"She'll be there, captain. Soon you'll know it, too." Urquart reached out and gripped Arflane's shoulder. Arflane was startled, but he did not resent the gesture. The harpooner peered into his face. The blue eyes were alight with the certainty of his own ideas. He shook his harpoon. "This is true," he said passionately. He pointed out to the ice. "That is true." He dropped his arm. "Find your strength again, captain. You'll need it on this voyage."

The harpooner clambered down from the bridge and disappeared, leaving Arflane feeling at the same time uneasy and more optimistic than he had felt for many months.

From that time on, Urquart would frequently appear on the bridge. He would say little; would simply stand by the rail or lean against the wheelhouse, as if by his presence he sought to transmit his own strength of will to Arflane. He was at once both silent mentor and support to the captain as the ship moved rapidly towards the edge of the plateau.

A few days later Manfred Rorsefne and Arflane stood in Arflane's cabin consulting the charts spread on the table before them.

"We'll reach the edge tomorrow," Rorsefne indicated the

chart of the plateau (the only detailed map they had). "The descent should be difficult, eh, captain?"

Arflane shook his head. "Not necessarily. By the look of it, there's a clear run down at this point." He put a finger on the chart. "The Great North Course, your uncle called it."

"Where he was wrecked?" Rorsefne pulled a face.

"Where he was wrecked," Arflane nodded. "If we steer a course North East by North by three quarters North we should reach this spot where the incline is fairly smooth and gradual and no hills in our way. The ice only gets rough at the bottom and we should have lost enough momentum by then to be able to cross without much difficulty. I can take her down, I think."

Rorsefne smiled. "You seem to have recovered your old self-confidence, captain."

Arflane resented the suggestion. "We'd best set the course," he said coldly.

As they left his cabin and came out on deck they almost bumped into Janek and Ulrica Ulsenn. She was helping him towards the entrance to the gangway that led to their quarters. Rorsefne bowed and grinned at them, but Arflane scowled. It was the first time since the voyage began that he had come so close to the woman. She avoided his glance, murmuring a greeting as she passed. Ulsenn, however, directed a poisonous glare at Arflane.

His legs very slightly weak, Arflane clambered up the companionway to the bridge. Urquart was standing there, nursing his harpoon and looking to starboard. He nodded to Arflane as the two men entered the wheelhouse.

The helmsman saluted Arflane as they came in. The heavy wheel moved very slightly and the man corrected it.

Arflane went over to the big, crude compass. The chronometer next to it was centuries old and failing, but the equipment was still sufficient to steer a fairly accurate course. Arflane unrolled the chart and spread it on the table next to the compass, making a few calculations, then he nodded to himself, satisfied that he had been right.

"We'd better have an extra man on that wheel," he decided. He put his head round the door of the wheelhouse and spoke to Urquart. "Mr. Urquart—we need another hand on the wheel. Will you get a man up here?"

Urquart moved towards the companionway.

"And put a couple more hands aloft, Mr. Urquart," Arflane called. "We need plenty of look-outs. The edge's coming up."

Arflane went back to the wheel and took it over from the helmsman. He gripped the spokes in both hands, letting the wheel turn a little of its own accord as its chains felt the great pull of the runners. Then, his eye on the compass, he turned the *Ice Spirit* several points to starboard.

When he was satisfied that they were established on their new course, he handed the wheel back to the helmsman as the second man came in.

"You've got an easy berth for a while, sailor," Arflane told the new man. "I want you to stand by to help with the wheel if it becomes necessary."

Rorsefne followed Arflane out on to the bridge again. He looked towards the quarter deck and saw Urquart speaking to a small group of hands. He pointed towards the harpooner. "Urquart seems to have attached himself to you, too, captain. He must regard you as one of the family." There was no sarcasm in his voice, but Arflane glanced at him suspiciously.

"I'm not so sure of that."

The young man laughed. "Janek certainly isn't, that's certain. Did you see how he glared at you as we went by? I don't know why he came on this trip at all. He hates sailing. He has responsibilities in Friesgalt. Maybe it was to protect Ulrica from the attentions of a lot of hairy sailors!"

Again Arflane felt uncomfortable, not sure how to interpret Rorsefne's words. "She's safe enough on this ship," he growled.

"I'm sure she is," Manfred agreed. "But Janek doesn't know that. He treats her jealously. She might be a whole storehouse full of canvas, the value he puts on her!"

Arflane shrugged.

Manfred lounged against the rail, staring vacantly up into the shrouds where one of the look-outs appointed by Urquart was already climbing towards the crow's nest in the mainmast royals.

"I suppose this will be our last day on safe ice," he said. "It's been too uneventful for me so far, this voyage. I'm

looking forward to some excitement when we reach the edge."

Arflane smiled grimly. "I doubt if you'll be disappointed."

The sky was still clear, blue and cloudless. The ice scintillated with the mirrored glare of the sun and the white, straining sails of the ship seemed to shimmer, reflecting in turn the brilliance of the ice. The runners could be heard faintly, bumping over the slightly uneven terrain, and sometimes a yard creaked above them. The mainmast look-out had reached his post and was settling himself into the crow's nest.

Rorsefne grinned. "I hope I won't be. And neither will you, I suspect. I thought you enjoyed a little adventure yourself. This kind of voyage can't be much pleasure for you, either."

The next day, the edge came into sight. It seemed that the horizon had drawn nearer, or had been cut off short, and Arflane, who had only passed close to the edge once in his life, felt himself shiver as he looked ahead.

The slope was actually fairly gradual, but from where he was positioned it looked as if the ground ended and that the ship would plunge to destruction. It was as if he had come to the end of the world. In a sense he had ; the world beyond the edge was completely unknown to him. Now he felt a peculiar kind of fear as the prow dipped and the ship began her descent.

On the bridge, Arflane put a megaphone to his lips.

"Get some grappling lines over the side, Mr. Petchnyoff," he shouted to his first officer on the quarter deck. "Jump to it!"

Petchnyoff hurried towards the lower deck to get a party together. Arflane watched as they began to throw out the grappling lines. The barbed prongs would slow their progress since all but the minimum sail had been taken in.

The grapples bit into the ice with a harsh shrieking and the ship began to lose speed. Then she began to wobble dangerously.

Hinsen was shouting from the wheelhouse. "Sir!"

Arflane strode into the wheelhouse. "What is it, Mr. Hinsen?"

The two hands at the wheel were sweating, clinging to the wheel as they desperately tried to keep the *Ice Spirit* on course.

"The runners keep turning, sir," Hinsen said in alarm. "Just a little this way and that, but we're having difficulty holding them. We could go over at this rate. They're catching in the channels in the ice, sir."

Arflane positioned himself between the two hands and took hold of the wheel. He realised at once what Hinsen meant. The runners were moving along shallow, iron-hard grooves in the ice, caused by the gradual descent of ice flows over the centuries. There was a real danger of the ship turning side-on, toppling over on the slope.

"We'll need two more hands on this," Arflane said. "Find two of the best helmsmen we've got, Mr. Hinsen—and make sure they've got muscles!"

Kristoff Hinsen hurried from the wheelhouse while Arflane and the hands hung on to the wheel, steering as best they could. The ship had begun to bump noticeably now and her whole deck was vibrating.

Hinsen brought the two sailors back with him and they took over. Even with the extra hands the ship still continued to bump and veer dangerously on the slope, threatening to go completely out of control. Arflane looked to the bow. The bottom of the incline was out of sight. The slope seemed to go on forever.

"Stay in charge here, Mr. Hinsen," Arflane said. "I'll go forward and see if I can make out what kind of ice is lying ahead of us."

Arflane left the bridge and made his way along the shivering deck until he reached the forecastle. The ice ahead seemed the same as the kind they were on at the moment. The ship bumped, veered, and then swung back on course again. The angle of the incline seemed to have increased and the deck sloped forward noticeably. As he turned back, Arflane saw Ulrica Ulsenn standing quite close to him. Janek Ulsenn was a little further behind her, clinging to the port rail, his eyes wide with alarm.

"Nothing to worry about, ma'am," Arflane said as he approached her. "We'll get her out of this somehow."

Janek Ulsenn had looked up and was calling his wife to him. With a hint of misery in her eyes, she looked back

at her husband, gathered up her skirts and moved away from Arflane across the swaying deck.

It was the first time he had seen any emotion at all in her face since they had parted. He felt a certain amount of surprise. His concern for the safety of the ship had made him forget his feelings for her and he had spoken to her as he might have spoken to reassure any passenger.

He was tempted to follow her then, but the ship lurched suddenly off course again and seemed in danger of sliding sideways.

Arflane ran rapidly back towards the bridge, clambered up and dashed into the wheelhouse. Hinsen and the four sailors were wrestling with the wheel, their faces streaming with sweat and their muscles straining. Arflane grabbed a spoke and joined them as they tried to get the ship back on course.

"We're travelling too damned slowly," he grunted. "If we could make better speed there might be a chance of bouncing over the channels or even slicing through them."

The ship lurched again and they grappled with the wheel. Arflane gritted his teeth as they forced the wheel to turn.

"Drop the bolts, sir!" Hinsen begged him. "Drop the heavy anchors!"

Arflane scowled at him. A captain never dropped the heavy anchors unless the situation was insoluble.

"What's the point of slowing down, Mr. Hinsen?" he said acidly. "It's extra speed we need—not less."

"Stop the ship altogether, sir—knock out the emergency bolt as well. It's our only chance. This must be what happened to Lord Rorsefne's ship when it was wrecked."

Arflane spat on the deck. "Heavy anchors—emergency bolts—we're as likely to be wrecked using them as not! No, Mr. Hinsen—we'll go down under full canvas!"

Hinsen almost lost control of the wheel again in his astonishment. He stared unbelievingly at his skipper.

"Full canvas, sir?"

The wheel jumped again and the ship's runners squealed jarringly as she began to lurch sideways. For several moments they strained at the wheel in silence until they had turned her back on to course.

"Two or three more like that and we'll lose her," the hand nearest Arflane said with conviction.

"Aye," Arflane grunted, glaring at Hinsen. "Set all sail, Mr. Hinsen."

When Hinsen hesitated once more Arflane impatiently left the wheel, grabbed a megaphone from the wall and went out on to the bridge.

He saw Petchnyoff on the quarter deck. The man looked frightened. There was an atmosphere of silent panic on the ship.

"Mr. Petchnyoff!" Arflane bellowed through the megaphone. "Get the men into the yards! Full canvas!"

The shocked faces of the crew stared back at him. Petchnyoff's face was incredulous. "What was that, sir?"

"Set all sails, Mr. Petchnyoff. We need some speed so we can steer this craft!"

The ship shuddered violently and began to turn again.

"All hands into the shrouds!" Arflane yelled, dropped the megaphone and ran back into the wheelhouse to join the men on the wheel. Hinsen avoided his eye, evidently convinced that the captain was insane.

Through the wheelhouse port, Arflane saw the men scrambling aloft. Once again they barely succeeded in turning the ship back on her course. Everywhere the sails began to crack down and billow out as they caught the wind. The ship began to move even faster down the steepening slope.

Arflane felt a strong sense of satisfaction as the wheel became less hard to handle. It still needed plenty of control, but they were having no great difficulty in holding their course. Now the danger was that they would find an obstruction on the slope and crash into it at full speed.

"Get on to the deck, Mr. Hinsen," he ordered the frightened second officer. "Tell Mr. Urquart to go aloft with a megaphone and keep an eye out ahead!"

The ice on both sides of the ship was now a blur as the ship gathered speed. Arflane glanced through the port and saw Urquart climbing into the lower yards of the foremast.

The huge ship leapt from the surface and came down again hard with her runners creaking, but she had become increasingly easier to handle and there were no immediate obstacles in sight.

Urquart's face was calm as he glanced back at the wheelhouse, but the crew looked very frightened still. Arflane

enjoyed their discomfort. He grinned broadly, his exhilaration tinged with some of their panic as he guided the ship down.

For an hour the schooner continued her rapid descent; it seemed that she sped down a slope that had no top and no bottom, for both were completely out of sight. The ship was handling easily, the runners hardly seeming to touch the ice. Arflane decided he could give the wheel to Hinsen. The second officer did not seem to relish the responsibility.

Going forward, Arflane climbed into the rigging to hang in the ratlines beside Urquart.

The harpooner smiled slightly. "You're in a wild mood, skipper," he said approvingly.

Arflane grinned back at him. "I'm just showing those cave-bound scuts how to sail a ship, that's all."

Before them, the ice sloped sharply, seeming to stretch on forever. On both sides it raced past, the spray of ice from the runners falling on deck. Once a chip of ice caught Arflane on the mouth, drawing blood, but he hardly felt it.

Soon the slope began to level out and the ice became rougher, but the ship's speed hardly slowed at all. Instead the great craft bounced over the ice, rising and falling as if carried on a series of huge waves.

The sensation added to Arflane's good spirits. He began to relax. The danger was as good as past. Swinging in the ratlines, he hummed a tune, sensing the tension decrease throughout the ship.

Some time later Urquart's voice said quietly: "Captain." Arflane glanced at the man and saw that his eyes had widened. He was pointing ahead.

Arflane peered beyond the low ridges of ice and saw what looked like a greenish black streak cutting across their path in the distance. He could not believe what it was. Urquart spoke the word.

"Crevasse, captain. Looks like a wide one, too. We'll never cross it."

Since the last chart had been made, a crack must have appeared in the surface of the ice at the bottom of the slope. Arflane cursed himself for not having anticipated something like it, for new crevasses were common enough, particularly in terrain like this.

"And we'll never stop in time at this speed." Arflane began to climb down the ratlines to the deck, trying to appear calm, hoping that the men would not see the crevasse. "Even the heavy anchors couldn't stop us—we'd just flip right over and tumble into it wrongside up."

Arflane reached the deck, trying to force himself to take some action when he was full of a deeply apathetic knowledge that there was no action to be taken.

Now the men saw the crevasse as the ship sped closer. A great shout of horror went up from them as they, too, realised there was no chance of stopping.

As Arflane reached the companionway leading to the bridge, Manfred Rorsefne and the Ulsenns hurried on to the deck. Manfred shouted to Arflane as he began to climb the ladder.

"What's happening, captain?"

Arflane laughed bitterly. "Take a look ahead!"

He reached the bridge and ran across to the wheelhouse, taking over the wheel from the ashen faced Hinsen.

"Can you turn her, sir?"

Arflane shook his head.

The ship was almost on the crevasse now. Arflane made no attempt to alter course.

Hinsen was almost weeping with fear. "Please, sir—try to turn her!"

The huge, yawning abyss rushed closer, the deep green ice of its sides flashing in the sunlight.

Arflane felt the wheel swing loose in his grasp; the front runners left firm ground and reached out over the crevasse as the ship hurtled into it.

Arflane sensed a peculiar feeling, almost of relief, as he anticipated the plunge downwards. Then, suddenly, he began to smile. The schooner was travelling at such speed that she might just reach the other side. The far edge of the crevasse was still on the incline, lower than the opposite edge.

Then the schooner had leapt through the air and smashed down on the other side. She rolled, threatening to capsize. Arflane staggered, but managed to cling to the wheel and swing her hard over. She began to slow under her impact, the runners scraping and bumping.

"We're all right, sir!" Hinsen was grinning broadly.
"You got us across, sir!"

"Something did, Mr. Hinsen. Here—take the wheel again, will you."

When Hinsen had taken over the wheel, Arflane went slowly out on to the bridge.

Men were picking themselves up from where they had fallen. One man lay still on the deck. Arflane left the bridge and made his way to where the hand was sprawled. He bent down beside him, turning him over. Half the bones in the body were broken. Blood crawled from the mouth. The man opened his eyes and smiled faintly at Arflane.

"I thought I'd had it that time, sir," he said. The eyes closed and the smile faded. The man was dead.

Arflane got up with a sigh, rubbing his forehead. His whole body was aching from handling the wheel. There was a scuffle of movement as the hands moved to the rails to look back at the crevasse, but not one of them spoke.

From the foremast, where he still clung, Urquart was roaring with laughter. The harsh sound echoed through the ship and broke the silence. Some of the men began to cheer and shout, turning away from the rails and waving at Arflane. Stern-faced, the skipper made his way back to the bridge and stood there for a moment while his men continued to cheer. Then he picked up his megaphone from where he had dropped it earlier and put it to his lips.

"All hands back aloft! Take in all sail! Jump to it!"

In spite of their high spirits, the crew leapt readily to obey him and the yards were soon alive with scurrying sailors reefing the sails.

Petchnyoff appeared on the quarter-deck. He looked up at his skipper and gave him a strange, dark look. He wiped his sleeve across his forehead and moved down towards the lower deck.

"Better get those grapples in, Mr. Petchnyoff," Arflane shouted at him. "We're out of danger now."

He looked aft at the disappearing crevasse, congratulating himself on his good fortune. If he had not decided to go down at full speed they would have reached the crevasse and been swallowed by it. The ship must have leapt forty feet.

He went back to the wheel to test it and judge if the

runners were in good order. They seemed to be working well, so far as their responses were concerned, but he wanted to satisfy himself that they had sustained no damage of any kind.

As the ship bumped to a gradual halt, all her sail furled, Arflane prepared to go over the side. He climbed down a rope ladder on to the ice. The big runners were scratched and indented in places but were otherwise undamaged. He looked up admiringly at the ship, running his hand along one of her struts. He was convinced that no other vessel could have taken the impact after leaping the crevasse.

Clambering back to the deck, he encountered Janek Ulsenn. The man's lugubrious features were dark with anger. Ulrica stood just behind him, her own face flushed. Beside her, Manfred Rorsefne looked as amusedly insouciant as ever. "Congratulations, captain," he murmured. "Great foresight."

Ulsenn began to bluster. "You are a reckless fool, Arflane! We were almost destroyed, every one of us! The men may think you anticipated that crevasse—but I know you did not. You have lost all their confidence!"

The statement was patently false. Arflane laughed and glanced about the ship.

"The men seem in good spirits to me. Excellent spirits, in fact."

"Mere reaction, now that the danger's past. Wait until they start to think what you nearly did to them!"

"I'm inclined to think, cousin," Manfred said, "that this incident will simply restore their faith in their captain's good luck. The hands place great store on a skipper's luck, you know."

Arflane was looking at Ulrica Ulsenn. She tried to glance away, but then she returned his look and Arflane thought that her expression might be one of admiration; then her eyes became cold and he shivered.

Manfred Rorsefne took Ulrica's arm and helped her back towards the gangway to her cabin, but Ulsenn continued to confront Arflane.

"You will kill us all, Brershillian!" he went on, apparently unaware that Arflane was paying little attention to him. His fear had plainly caused him to forget his humiliation of a few days before. Arflane looked at him calmly.

"I will certainly kill somebody one day," he smiled, and strode towards the foredeck under the admiring eyes of his crew and the enraged glare of Lord Janek Ulsenn.

With the plateau left behind, the ice became rough but easier to negotiate so long as the ship maintained a fair speed. The outline of the plateau was visible behind them for several days, a vast wall of ice rising into the clouds. The air was warmer now and there was less snow. Arflane felt uncomfortable as the heat increased and the air wavered, sometimes seeming to form odd shapes out of nothing. There were glaciers to be seen to all points ahead and, in the heat, Arflane became afraid that they would hit an ice break. Ice breaks occurred where the crust of the ice became thin over an underground river. A ship floundering in an ice break, since it had not been built for any kind of water, often had little chance of getting out and could easily sink.

As the ship moved on, travelling N.W. by N., and nearing the equator, the crew and officers settled into a more orderly routine. Arflane's previous moods were forgotten; his luck was highly respected, and he had become very popular with the men.

Only Petchnyoff surprised Arflane in his refusal to forgive him for his earlier attitude. He spent most of his spare time with Janek Ulsenn; the two men could often be seen walking along the deck together. Their friendliness irritated Arflane to some extent. He felt that in a sense Petchnyoff was betraying him, but it was no business of his what company the young first officer chose, and he performed his duties well enough. Arflane even began to feel a slight sympathy for Ulsenn; he felt he could allow the man one friend on the voyage.

Urquart still had the habit of standing near him on the bridge and the gaunt harpooner had become a comfort to Arflane. They rarely talked, but the sense of comradeship between them had become very strong.

It was even possible for Arflane to see Ulrica Ulsenn without attempting to force some reaction from her, and he had come to tolerate Manfred Rorsefne's sardonic, bantering manner.

It was only the heat that bothered him now. The tempera-

ture had risen to several degrees above zero and the crew were working stripped to the waist. Arflane, against his will, had been forced to remove his heavy fur jacket. Urquart, however, had refused to take off any of his clothing and stoically bore his discomfort.

Arflane kept two look-outs permanently on watch for signs of thin ice. At night, he took in all sail and threw out grappling hooks so that the ship drifted very slowly.

The wind was poor and progress was slow enough during the day. From time to time mirages were observed, usually in the form of inverted glaciers, and Arflane had a great deal of difficulty explaining them to the men who superstitiously regarded them as omens that had to be interpreted.

Till one day the wind dropped altogether, and they were becalmed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Harpoon

THEY WERE BECALMED for a week in the heat. The sky and ice glared shimmering copper under the sun. Men sat around in bunches, disconsolately playing simple games, or talking in low, miserable voices. Though stripped of most of their clothes, they still wore their snow visors; from a distance they looked like so many ungainly birds clustered on the deck. The officers kept them as busy as they could, but there was little to do. When Arflane gave a command the men obeyed less readily than before; morale was becoming bad.

Arflane was frustrated and his own temper was starting to fray again. His movements became nervous and his tone brusque.

Walking along the lower deck, he was approached by Fydur, the ship's bosun, a hairy individual with great black beetling eyebrows.

"Excuse me, sir, sorry to bother you, but any idea how long we'll . . . ?"

"Ask the Ice Mother, not me." Arflane pushed Fydur to one side, leaving the man sour-faced and angry.

There were no clouds to be seen ; there was no sign of the weather changing. Arflane, brooding again on Ulrica Ulsenn, stalked about the ship with his face set in a scowl.

On the bridge one day he looked down and saw Janek Ulsenn and Petchnyoff talking with some animation to Fydur and a group of the hands. By the way in which some of them glanced at the bridge, Arflane could guess the import of the conversation. He glanced questioningly at Urquart, leaning against the wheelhouse ; the harpooner shrugged.

"We've got to give them something to do," Arflane muttered. "Or tell them something to improve their spirits. There's the beginnings of a mutiny in that little party, Mr. Urquart."

"Aye, sir." Urquart sounded almost smug.

Arflane frowned, then made up his mind. He called to the second officer, at his post on the quarter deck.

"Get the men together, Mr. Hinsen. I want to talk to them."

"All hands in line!" Hinsen shouted through his megaphone. "All hands before the bridge. Captain talking."

Slowly the hands began to assemble, many of them scowling openly at Arflane. The little group with Ulsenn and Petchnyoff straggled up and stood behind the main press of men.

"Mr. Petchnyoff. Will you come up here!" Arflane looked sharply at his first officer. "You too please, Mr. Hinsen. Bosun—to your post."

Slowly Petchnyoff obeyed the command and Fydur, with equally poor grace, took up his position facing the men.

When all the officers were behind him on the bridge Arflane cleared his throat and gripped the rail, leaning forward to look down at the crew.

"You're in a bad mood, lads, I can see. The sun's too hot and the wind's too absent. There isn't a damned thing I can do about getting rid of the first or finding the second. We're becalmed and that's all there is to it. I've seen you through one or two bad scrapes already—so maybe you'll help me sweat this one out. Sooner or later the wind will come."

"But when, sir?" A hand spoke up ; one of those who had been conversing with Ulsenn.

Arflane glanced grimly at Fydur. The bosun pointed a finger at the hand. "Hold your tongue."

Arflane was in no mood to answer the remark directly. He paused, then continued.

"Perhaps we'll get a bit of wind when discipline aboard this ship tightens up. But I can't predict the weather. If some of you are so damned eager to be on the move, then I suggest you get out on to the ice and pull this tub to her destination!"

Another man muttered something. Fydur silenced him. Arflane leaned down. "What was that, bosun?"

"Man wanted to know just what our destination was, sir," Fydur replied. "I think a lot of us . . ."

"That's why I called you together," Arflane went on. "We're bound for New York. . . ."

Some of the men laughed. To go to New York was a metaphor meaning to die—to join the Ice Mother.

"New York," Arflane repeated, glaring at them. "We've charts that show the city's position. We're going north to New York. Questions?"

"Aye, sir—they say New York doesn't exist on this world, sir. They say it's in the sky—or—somewhere . . ." The tall sailor who spoke had a poor grasp of metaphysics.

"New York's as solid as you and on firm ice," Arflane assured him. "The Lord Pyotr Rorsefne saw it. That was where he came from when I found him. It was in his will that we should go there. You remember the will? It was read out soon after the lord died."

The men nodded, murmuring to one another.

"Does that mean we'll see the Ice Mother's court?" another sailor asked.

"Possibly," Arflane said gravely.

The babble that broke out among the men rose higher and higher. Arflane let them talk for a while. Most of them had received the news dubiously at first, but now some of them were beginning to grin with excitement, their imagination captured.

After a while Arflane told the bosun to quieten them down. As the babble died, and before Arflane could speak, the clear, haughty tones of Janek Ulsenn came over the heads of the sailors. He was leaning against the mizzen

mast, toying with a piece of rope. "Perhaps that is why we are becalmed, captain?"

Arflane frowned. "What do you mean by that, Lord Ulsenn?"

"It occurred to me to wonder that the reason we are getting no wind is because the Ice Mother isn't sending us any. She does not want us to visit her in New York!" Ulsenn was deliberately playing on the superstition of the hands. This new idea set them babbling again.

This time Arflane roared at them to stop talking. He glowered at Ulsenn, unable to think of a reply that would satisfy his men.

Urquart stepped forward then and leaned his harpoon against the rail. Still dressed in all his matted furs, his blue eyes cold and steady, he seemed, himself, to be some demi-god of the ice. The men fell silent.

"What do we suffer from?" he called harshly. "From cold impossible to bear? No! We suffer from *heat*! Is that the Ice Mother's weapon? Would she use her enemy to stop us? No! You're fools if you think she's against us. When has the Ice Mother decreed that men should not sail to her in New York? Never! I know the doctrine better than any man aboard. I am the Ice Mother's pledged servant; my faith in her is stronger than anything you could feel. I *know* what the Ice Mother wishes; she wishes us to sail to New York. She wishes us to pay her court so that when we return to the Eight Cities we may silence all who doubt her! Through Captain Arflane she fulfills her will; that's why I sail with him. That's why we all sail with him! It's our destiny."

The harsh, impassioned tones of Urquart brought complete silence to the crew, but they had no apparent effect on Ulsenn.

"You're listening to a madman talk," he called. "And another madman's in command. If we follow these two our only destiny is a lonely death on the ice."

There was a blur of movement, a thud; Urquart's great harpoon flew across the deck over the heads of the sailors to bury itself in the mast, an inch from Ulsenn's head. The man's face went white and he staggered back, eyes wide. He began to splutter something, but Urquart vaulted over

the bridge rail to the deck and pushed his way through the crowd to confront the aristocrat.

"You speak glibly of death, Lord Ulsenn," Urquart said savagely. "But you had best speak quietly or perhaps the Ice Mother may see fit to take you to her bosom sooner than you might wish." He began to tug the harpoon from the mast. "It is for the sake of your kind that we sail. Best let a little of your blood tonight, my tame little lord, to console the Ice Mother—lest all your blood be let before this voyage ends."

With tears of rage in his eyes, Ulsenn hurled himself at the massive harpooner. Urquart smiled quietly and picked the man up to throw him, almost gently, to the deck. Ulsenn landed on his face and rolled over, his nose bleeding. He crawled back, away from the smiling giant. The men were laughing now, almost in relief.

Arflane's lips quirked in a half-smile too; then all his humour vanished as Ulrica Ulsenn ran over the deck to her injured husband, knelt beside him and wiped the blood from his face.

Manfred Rorsefne joined them on the bridge.

"Shouldn't you have a little better control over your officers, captain?" he suggested blandly.

Arflane wheeled to face him. "Urquart knows my will," he said.

Hinsen was pointing to the south. "Captain—big clouds coming up aft!"

Within an hour the sails were filled with a wind that also brought chilling sleet, forcing them to huddle back into their furs.

They were soon under way through the grey morning. The crew were Arflane's men again. Ulsenn and his wife had disappeared below and Manfred Rorsefne had joined them; but, for the moment, Arflane insisted that all his officers stay with him on the bridge while he ordered full canvas set and sent the look-outs aloft.

Hinsen and Petchnyoff waited expectantly until he turned his attention back to them. He looked at Petchnyoff sombrely for a time; tension grew between them before he turned away shrugging. "All right, you're dismissed."

With Urquart a silent companion beside him, Arflane laughed quietly as the ship gathered speed.

Two nights later Arflane lay in his bunk unable to sleep. He listened to the slight bumping of the runners over the uneven surface of the ice, the sleet-laden wind in the rigging and the creak of the yards. All the sounds were normal; yet some sixth sense insisted that something was wrong. Eventually he swung from his bunk, climbed into his clothes, buckled on his flenching cutlass and went on deck. He had been ready for trouble of some kind ever since he had watched Petchnyoff, Ulsenn and Fydur talking together. Urquart's oratory would have had little effect on them, he was certain. Fydur might be loyal again, but Ulsenn certainly wasn't; on the few occasions when he had showed himself above decks it had been invariably with Petchnyoff.

Arflane looked up at the sky. It was still overcast and there were few stars visible. The only light came from the moon and the lights that burned dimly in the wheelhouse. He could just make out the silhouettes of the look-outs in the crosstrees high above, the bulky forms of the look-outs forward and aft. He looked back at the wheelhouse. Petchnyoff should be on watch, but he could see no one but the helmsman on the bridge.

He climbed up and strode into the wheelhouse. The helmsman gave him a short nod of recognition. "Sir."

"Where's the officer of the watch, sailor?"

"He went forward, sir, I believe."

Arflane pursed his lips. He had seen no one forward but the man on watch. Idly he walked over to the compass, comparing it with a chart.

They were a full three degrees off course. Arflane looked up sharply at the helmsman. "Three degrees off course, man! Have you been sleeping?"

"No, sir!" The helmsman looked aggrieved. "Mr. Petchnyoff said our course was true, sir."

"Did he?" Arflane's face clouded. "Alter your course, helmsman. Three degrees starboard."

He left the bridge and began to search the ship for Petchnyoff. The man could not be found. Arflane went below to the lower deck where the hands lay in their hammocks. He slapped the shoulder of the nearest man. The sailor grunted and cursed.

"What's up?"

"Captain here. Get on deck with the helmsman. Know any navigation?"

"A bit, sir," the man mumbled as he swung out of his hammock scratching his head.

"Then get above to the bridge. Helmsman'll tell you what to do."

Arflane stamped back through the dark gangways until he reached the passengers' quarters. Janek Ulsenn's cabin faced his wife's. Arflane hesitated and then knocked heavily on Ulsenn's door. There was no reply. He turned the handle. The door was not locked. He went in.

The cabin was empty. Arflane had expected to find Petchnyoff there. The pair must be somewhere else on the ship. No lights shone in any of the other cabins.

His rage increasing with every pace, Arflane returned to the quarter deck, listening carefully for any murmur of conversation which would tell him where the two men were.

A voice from the bridge called to him.

"Any trouble, sir?"

It was Petchnyoff.

"Why did you desert your watch, Mr. Petchnyoff?" Arflane shouted. "Come down here!"

Petchnyoff joined him in a few moments. "Sorry, sir, I——"

"How long were you gone from your post?"

"A little while, sir. I had to relieve myself."

"Come with me to the bridge, Mr. Petchnyoff." Arflane clambered up the companionway and pushed on into the wheelhouse. He stood by the compass as Petchnyoff entered. The two men by the wheel looked curiously at the first officer.

"Why did you tell this man that we were on course when we were three degrees off?" Arflane thundered.

"Three degrees, sir?" Petchnyoff sounded offended. "We weren't off course, sir."

"Weren't we, Mr. Petchnyoff? Would you like to consult the charts?"

Petchnyoff went to the chart table and unrolled one of the maps. His voice sounded triumphant as he said, "What's wrong, sir? This is the course we're following."

Arflane frowned and came over to look at the chart. Peering at it closely he could see where a line had been erased and another one drawn in. He looked at the chart he had consulted earlier. That showed the original course. Why should someone tamper with the charts? And if they did, why make such a small alteration that was bound to be discovered? It could be Ulsenn, making mischief, Arflane supposed. Or even Petchnyoff trying to cause trouble.

"Can you suggest how this chart came to be changed, Mr. Petchnyoff?"

"No, sir. I didn't know it had been. Who could have . . ."

"Has anyone been here tonight—a passenger, perhaps? Any member of the crew who had no business here?"

"Only Manfred Rorsefne earlier, sir. No one else."

"Were you here the whole time?"

"No, sir. I went to inspect the watch."

Petchnyoff could easily be lying. He was in the best position to alter the chart. There again the helmsman could have been bribed by Manfred Rorsefne to let him look at the charts. There was no way of knowing who might be to blame.

Arflane tapped his gloved fingers on the chart table.

"We'll look into this in the morning, Mr. Petchnyoff."

"Aye, aye, sir."

As he left the wheelhouse, Arflane heard the look-out shouting. The man's voice was thin against the sounds of the wind-blown sleet. The words, however, were quite clear.

"Ice break! Ice break!"

Arflane ran to the rail, trying to peer ahead. An ice break at night was even worse than an ice break in the day. The ship was moving slowly; there might be time to throw out grapples. He shouted up to the bridge. "All hands on deck. All hands on deck, Mr. Petchnyoff!"

Petchnyoff's voice began to bellow through a megaphone, repeating Arflane's orders.

In the darkness, men began to surge about in confusion. Then the whole ship lurched to one side and Arflane was thrown off his feet. He slid forward, grabbing the rail and hauling himself up, struggling for a footing on the sloping deck as men yelled in panic.

Over the sound of their voices, Arflane heard the creak-

ing and cracking as more ice gave way under the weight of the ship. The vessel dipped further to port.

Arflane swore violently as he staggered back towards the wheelhouse. It was too late to drop the heavy anchors; now they might easily help push the ship through the ice.

Around him in the night pieces of ice were tossed high into the air to smash down on the deck. There was a hissing and gurgling of disturbed water, a further creaking as new ice gave way.

Arflane rushed into the wheelhouse, grabbed a megaphone from the wall and ran back to the bridge.

"All hands to the lines! All hands over the starboard side! Ice break! Ice break!"

Elsewhere Petchnyoff shouted specific orders to hands as they grabbed mooring cables and ran to the side. They knew their drill. They had to get over the rail with the cables and try to drag the ship back off the thin ice by hand. It was the only chance of saving her.

Again the ice creaked and collapsed. Spray gushed; slabs of ice began to groan upwards and press against the vessel's sides. Water began to creep over the deck.

Arflane swung his leg over the bridge rail and leapt down to the deck. The starboard runners were now lifting into the air; the *Ice Spirit* was in imminent danger of capsizing.

Hinsen, half-dressed, appeared beside Arflane. "This is a bad one, sir—we're too deep in by the looks of it. If the ice directly beneath us goes, we don't stand a chance . . ."

Arflane nodded curtly. "Get over the side and help them haul. Is someone looking after the passengers?"

"I think so, sir."

"I'll check. Do your best, Mr. Hinsen."

Arflane slid down towards the door below the bridge, pushing it open and stumbling down the gangway towards the passengers' cabins.

He passed both Mansfred Rorsefne's cabin and Ulsenn's. When he reached Ulriea Ulsenn's cabin he kicked the door open and rushed in.

There was no one there.

Arflane wondered grimly whether his passengers had somehow left the ship before the ice break had come.

(to be concluded)

— MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Now-it-can-be-told Department

There are many reasons why writers use pen names—and most of the reasons are legitimate. A writer may have two stories in a single issue of a magazine, or write different sorts of stories each of which is identified with a pen name, or may just be ashamed to have his worse stuff appear under his real name. Another reason is conflict of interest. One of the editors of this magazine was, for a number of years, a correspondent of a medical newspaper. From this work he extracted at least one novel which will be familiar to sf IMPULSE readers (PLAGUE FROM SPACE) and the background material for a series of stories more than slightly inimical towards the more stuffy aspects of the medical profession. To prevent a conflict of interests the stories were published under the name of "Hank Dempsey".

Now it can be told. The connection with the medical journal has been severed and the real name can be revealed at last. And with the author's name the latest story in the chronicle of that rather unusual organization, CWACC.

THE VOICE OF THE CWACC

by Harry Harrison

"You must realize that it has a limited range," the ugly man said, rubbing at his broken nose with a wart-covered knuckle. "You cannot expect a microminiaturized instrument this small to be as powerful as a monster like that." He pointed first at the cigar-box sized case in his hand, then at the nearby mobile radar installation: a large, olive-drab trailer that was mounted with a dish aerial, had an auxiliary diesel-electric generator, and was stuffed with instruments and operators.

"Miracles I do not expect. Results I do. Get cracking, Espantoso, before I freeze," the Air Force Colonel growled in an exceedingly military voice.

"I proceed, general," the ugly man said, "Espantoso keeps his word, always. I will demonstrate my extremely ingenious, some would say miraculous, invention after the briefest of explanations, while I set it up." He produced what might have been intended as a friendly smile, but the effect was spoiled by the two yellow teeth that protruded over the side of his lower lip. There was a metallic click as he pulled a sharp, protruding spike from the bottom of the metal box.

"This instrument is cleverly designed to be used by troops in the field, to enable them to detect the approach of low-flying aircraft that might be seeking to do them injury. Because of certain highly secret, unpatented, incredibly artful components my invention is not stopped by ground clutter. It laughs at trees and houses—even small hills—and can detect aircraft while they are still beyond optical range."

While he talked, Espantoso held the device carefully in both hands, dropped to his knees, and pushed the spike slowly into the ground to support it. A tiny, horn-shaped aerial projected from the top and, when he threw one of the switches on the elaborate control panel that covered the front, the aerial began to revolve. The group of on-lookers looked on abstractedly and shivered; whatever enthusiasm they had arrived with had been blown away by the arctic wind that howled across the unobstructed acres of the ploughed fields that surrounded them.

"Get on with it, will you," the colonel mumbled through blue lips, and the knot of uniformed men behind him stirred and hummed agreement. Only the inventor and Jeff O'Hare were unbothered by the temperature. Espantoso because he was aware of nothing other than his creation, O'Hare because he had travelled out from the city by motorcycle. His boots, pants, jacket and gloves were fleece-lined and warm, and—since the machine was air cooled—he had poured the antifreeze into himself. The remains of the pint bottle were in his saddlebag, ready to see him home.

"For simplicity in field use," Espantoso explained, making rapid adjustments on the dials, "I have utilized an

illuminated compass card instead of a sweep image tube. This removes all necessity to translate the display on the screen. My circuitry does all this, hard to believe you say? —but watch."

He threw a switch and a light began blinking on the circle, next to NNE, then stopped and the NE light took up the rhythm.

"And about time," the colonel rasped. "Tell the mobile to begin recordings, log the time of this order, start reading back the display of that crackerjack box for recording."

"Yessir, yessir, yessir," his aide said, thumbing his handie-talkie to life and whispering quickly into it.

"There, there! The proof of the pudding is in the seeing!" Espantoso danced a quick jig, rusty coat-tails flapping, as a VC10 roared in low from the northeast, still reaching for altitude after taking off. "I chose this location because of its near proximity to the airfield, there will be much opportunity to prove my invention's worth."

"And I know about the airfield too," the colonel said, with a very unhumorous smile. "And I've made my own arrangements. Start them coming in," he called over to his aide, then pulled Jeff aside.

"There are ways of finding out about the commercial flights," the colonel told him. "But there is a squadron of training planes near here, and their problem today is to make simulated attacks over this point, from random directions. We'll see just how well your protégé does then, Mr. O'Hare."

"Nothing to do with me, sir," Jeff said agreeably. "You found him in the CWACC YEARBOOK for 1965 and approached him yourself to demonstrate his invention."

"Don't want to quibble, O'Hare, but your organization sponsored him and paid him, and rest assured you'll get a share of the credit if this gadget works."

"Not wishing to quibble, either, colonel, but the Committee for Welfare, Administration and Consumer Control is merely a fact-gathering organization and has no responsibility in regards to the people who receive its grants. We are humble. We desire no credit. Neither do we wish to be standing in front of the fan if something should go wrong."

The colonel spun about sharply. "Are you suggesting

that the mini-radar does not work? That we are being duped?"

"I suggest nothing, sir. I'm just pointing out that CWACC is completely neutral in these matters. I'm simply here as an observer—at your suggestion. And, just in case the colonel has forgotten, CWACC is a non-profit, benevolent foundation dedicated to paying grants to research workers who meet our very loose qualifications. Our founder, the late Wolfgang Schlussel was saved from an untimely death by a medical quack after the regular doctors had started sending him coffin advertisements. He lived a good number of years longer and when he finally kicked the bucket he left all of his money to this foundation to sponsor the search for other quacks. To put it simply we look for them and give them a bit of money—but we don't vouch for them."

The colonel's answer was drowned out in the scream of jets as a hedgehopping Air Force plane streaked by over their heads: he spun about to look at the mini-radar.

"Right on the head, sir," one of the officers said. "This gadget has been spotting them all—including that last one—while they're still out of eyeball contact. I think we're onto something hot here."

One by one, from all points of the compass, the jets roared in, and the blinking light announced every arrival. When the last plane rumbled away into the distance Espantoso was grinning like a mad ogre and the colonel chortled with pleasure.

"That's the last one, and it looked like a perfect record to me," he said.

"The fruits of pure genius," Espantoso said modestly, tossing the strands of lank hair from in front of his red little eyes.

"Isn't that an aircraft?" Jeff asked. "To the south there, low on the horizon. I don't think your machine detected that one."

"Where? I see nothing!" Espantoso shrilled, turning to look in the direction of Jeff's pointing finger. "And it is surely out of range, I warned you there would be . . ."

"Looks pretty close to me," Jeff said, reaching behind the inventor's back for the mini-radar. All the officers had

turned as well and, for the moment, no one was looking at the machine. Jeff's fingers fumbled around the side of it.

"Nothing—all lies," Espantoso said, then caught sight of what Jeff was doing. "Spy! Hands off! Criminal!" he howled.

"Just a moment more," Jeff said, then, "Yes—that should do it."

His fingers found a latch and something clicked sharply. The front of the radar swung open like a door.

"Well, well, what do we have here," Jeff said, straightening up.

The door was pushed wide open and a plump, white rat jumped down to the ground.

No one moved. The rat sat up, wriggled its nose and twitched its whiskers as it looked about. Then it dropped back on all fours and scuttled rapidly across the furrowed earth towards Espantoso. The colonel reached down to stop it as it passed him, then shouted in pain and jerked his hand away as its razor teeth slashed at his fingers. The rat reached Espantoso, scrambled up his pants leg and dived out of sight in the pocket of his overcoat.

Screaming curses in a foreign tongue, Espantoso spun about, but the lieutenant standing next to him caught at his sleeve. "Just a moment—" he said, but his words were cut off as the inventor's wildly flailing fist caught him square on the nose. Blood spurted from it, the officer let go, and Espantoso began running heavily across the fields towards a line of dark trees on the horizon.

From the time the rat had first appeared only a few seconds had passed. Dumbfounded, the clutch of Air Force officers watched as the inventor thudded away, until the colonel broke the spell.

"After that man, you idiots! I want to talk to him!"

With a rush of feet they left, all except Jeff and the two wounded officers. Jeff looked at the second lieutenant who was pressing a blood-sodden handkerchief to his nose.

"I see you've got a pilot's wings," Jeff said. "Do you think you can fly one of these things?" He pointed at his motorcycle. "Espantoso must have had plenty of practice at broken field running, they're never going to catch him on foot."

The lieutenant looked back and forth from the cycle to the swiftly vanishing figures, and slow intelligence gleamed in his eyes. "Can I!" he shouted, hurling away the handkerchief and leaping astride the machine. Jeff threw him the keys and, with a thunderous roar of exhaust, he kicked it to life and hurtled away across the field. The line of running men and the pursuing motorcycle passed over a hill and vanished from sight.

"I should thank you for exposing this fraud," the colonel said, gloomily watching the blood drip from the end of his forefinger. "Though I'm not really quite sure just what happened."

"You were about to be swindled—through no fault of your own since it was very well done. When I got your invitation for this demonstration, I dug a little more into Espantoso's background. I've always wondered what was behind his device. I tracked him back to Quito, where he was employed by the largest experimental electronic laboratory in the country . . ."

"We did that too, that was one of the factors that decided us to see his device."

"Did you find out what he did there?"

"Well . . . , not exactly, but I assumed . . ."

"CWACC assumes nothing, if you'll excuse me for saying so, colonel. Espantoso was an animal handler."

"A what?"

"A custodian of our furry friends, rats, mice, hamsters, the usual run of experimental laboratory animals." Jeff bent and picked up the rat-cage *cum* radar. "When he saw how the rodents reacted to high frequency sound during the experiments he must have dreamed up this idea. Three quarters of this gadget is just a padded dormitory for the beast, but there is a battery and a lot of circuitry at this end."

"I haven't the slightest idea what you are talking about."

"Simply, this device is a sound detector, not a radar detector. A miniature of those big horn things they used in the thirties. The high-pitched sound from a distant jet is picked up by this receiver on top, amplified and fed into this loudspeaker in the rat compartment. As far as we're concerned the sound would still be inaudible—though

louder—but rats can hear supersonics that we can't. And there is the foot operated switch. The beast was trained to press the switch whenever it heard the sound of a jet, ignoring everything else. Ingenious."

"Thievery! What we thought was an electronic device was a vermin's hearing aid. I'll fix that Espantoso."

"Think first, colonel. Abandon your modern passion for gadgetry. The thing did work—so perhaps a nice, cheap, easy to maintain 'ratar' might be as good as radar."

The colonel thought about it, rubbing his chin speculatively. "It could be worth looking into. But how did you know—why did you open the gadget?"

Jeff pointed. "Air holes in the baek. What possible use could there be for air holes in a solid-state circuit?"

Detective Sergeant Mannheimer of the city police lowered the heavy field-glasses and grumbled unhappily deep inside his chest. He was well hidden from sight in the little copse, behind and to the rear of the military party, yet still had a perfect spot for observation. He had watched the experiment, up to and including its baffling conclusion when something unobservable had happened and most of the participants had rushed out of sight over the horizon. In his heart he wanted to believe that this meant trouble for Jeff O'Hare, but he knew it wasn't really so. O'Hare had apparently done something to the instrument that had started the trouble, and when the others had gone he and the ranking officer had discussed it at length. Now they were separating—and shaking hands. That tore it. Mannheimer didn't know how it had been done, but he knew well enough that once more O'Hare had escaped from justice.

Trudging heavily back to the police car that he had parked on the lane, the sergeant allowed himself to dwell on the injustice of the world that permitted an obvious criminal like O'Hare and his crackpot organization to pass unscathed through so much difficulty. The man, and everyone associated with him, smelt of crime. Mannheimer had always disliked him, and since O'Hare had recently done him a big favour and helped him out of a tight spot, he hated him even more.

All during the drive back to the station his thoughts

chugged along in this same groove, a deep groove now, since his intelligence was small, hard and dense and quickly wore a rut that it could not escape from. *O'Hare* he thought, as he clomped stolidly up the old wooden stairs, and his fists clenched, *O'Hare*. An image of grey prison bars rose up and his palms sweated to get *O'Hare* behind them.

"What's going on here?" he asked, looking around at the crowd in the lieutenant's office.

"Shut up, Mannheimer," the lieutenant snapped, then turned back to talk to the group around his desk. Mannheimer sidled along the wall towards a horse-faced detective with red hair sprouting from his nostrils and ears.

"Pugh," Mannheimer whispered, "what's going on here?"

"A lawyer's come around to spring the wee Chinee we brought in yesterday. The lieutenant dinna fash him and is making it difficult." Pugh had left the rock-bound shores of Scotland thirty years earlier, but still carried more than a small memory of it in his voice. "The lawyer there, Dobbson, has had the charges dropped."

"What charges?"

"Ch'in, he's been fleecing the public, claiming to cure all manner of diseases by sticking the marks wi' pins. Elderly female members of the public, you'll understand. One of them turned the mon in, but some of the others prevailed upon her to change her mind, and even raised funds to hire this lawyer to defend this quack."

"Quack," Mannheimer said, "Quack . . . quack!" with growing enthusiasm. He ignored Pugh's highly suspicious look and pushed through the crowd around the desk until he could speak softly to the lieutenant.

"I think you oughta release the prisoner, sir . . ."

"Beat it, Mannheimer."

"You gotta listen to me, sir. We can use this swindler on a more important case."

The lieutenant, who was tiring of the matter anyway, allowed himself to be drawn aside and convinced. He returned to his desk and called the lawyer over.

"I can't agree that the matter is as black and white as you say, Mr Dobbson, but I no longer see that we have reason to hold the prisoner. Besides, Sergeant Mannheimer

here, a well-known humanitarian, has encouraged me to show all leniency. Ch'in will be released as soon as his personal property comes up from the storeroom. You'll help us if you would please wait outside."

Dobbson, who had a cool-eyed and very efficient look for a lawyer, glanced back and forth at the police officers, then made up his mind. "That sounds all right. I'll be waiting just outside. This shouldn't take long."

The lawyer followed the others out of the lieutenant's office, and when the door had closed behind the last of them Ch'in, a slight oriental with horn-rimmed glasses and a single, prominent, gold tooth, looked up at the hulking forms of the policemen and made a slight bow.

"May you live a thousand years for your kindness. It shall be recorded to your honour." He spoke English well, but with a sing-song Chinese accent.

"We help you, you help us," the lieutenant said bluntly.

Ch'in spread his hands helplessly. "What aid can I offer? I, a humble physician with little knowledge of your local ways . . ."

"Knock off the Charlie Chan routine," the lieutenant said, tapping a criminal record sheet with his forefinger. "You been inside twice, and you were born in New York City's Chinatown."

"So what's the crime in that?" Ch'in asked in authentic New York nasal tones from which all trace of oriental splendour had vanished. "I done nothin' now, you can't hold me . . ."

"Relax," Mannheimer said, "and I will explain. You are a quack and you are going to meet a guy what runs a nut-club for quacks. We been trying to pin a rap on him for a long time, but he always manages to slide out from under. So now you're gonna help us."

"Not me! What do I look like—a rat? Help finger some slob . . ."

"Relax," the lieutenant said. "You have no cause to worry. Would we, police officers, ask you to commit a crime?"

"Yes."

"One more crack like that and I lock you up and throw the key away," the lieutenant snarled. "All you have to do is get these CWACC people to take you on, they'll even

pay you for making reports to them on your needle nonsense. Then you keep your eyes open. Let us know what's happening, that's all. We'll take it from there. All we need is an inside lead to their operation. Agreed?"

"What say I got? It's a frameup." Ch'in drew himself up and smoothed the wrinkles in his rough prison clothes. He joined his fingertips and bowed slightly from the waist and all traces of Mott Street vanished. "Your illustrious arguments utterly convince this worthless one. I will render whatever humble aid I can."

"Mail the forms off as soon as they are completed, or once a month, whichever you want," Jeff O'Hare said, passing over the thick bundle of forms and envelopes. Ch'in took a large, old-fashioned briefcase off the floor of the taxi and carefully stowed them away.

"I am honoured by the attention of your organization," he said, "and made humble by your advance of monies against my grant."

"Happy to have you, Ch'in, and I'm looking forward to your reports. We had another acupuncture practitioner on our books, but the DT's finished him before he finished his reports." Jeff looked sideways, briefly. "You don't drink, do you?"

"If you mean alcoholic beverages, I never imbibe them."

"Well, then, may our relationship be a profitable one. Here's your stop," he said as the cab braked at the kerb.

Ch'in climbed out and waved formally as the cab pulled away, a thin, tiny figure in an ankle length black gown. He must have been seen from the house because the door opened as he approached. A woman of advanced but indeterminate years—her bluish-grey hair concealed the greying touches of time—stood in the doorway.

"You must be Dr. Ch'in," she said with a quaver, "you can be no other. You can't know how long I have looked forward to this moment."

"I as well, dear Madame Rosenkranz."

"Come in, please do come in."

Ch'in opened his briefcase in the hall and took out a flat, black enamelled box. He raised it in both hands, then glanced towards the stairs. "It is necessary to cleanse the needles, if you don't mind . . .?"

"Yes, of course, the bathroom. At the head of the stairs, I'll show you."

"But no, you must relax with your eyes closed, this is so important, very relaxed. If there is someone else . . . ?"

"No one, I'm alone."

"But no need. I'm sure I can find my own way."

"If you insist, doctor. I'll be in the living room."

"Completely relaxed, do not forget."

Ch'in silently mounted the stairs, glanced into the empty bathroom as he passed, then tried the next door. He looked briefly into this room, and all the others on the floor, before sliding silently into the master bedroom. It took him only a few moments to find the wall safe concealed behind an eye-shattering Picasso, but he did no more than glance at it as he swung the painting back into place. He took more time on the window, tracing the wires of the burglar alarm, before he scraped the insulation from them in a concealed spot beneath the sill, then shorted them with a piece of copper wire taken from the black metal box. There were no therapeutic acupuncture needles in this container, but there was a compact and complete tool kit. Ch'in used this to cut the alarm wires, then concealed the cut with a dab of paint from a tiny tube.

He worked efficiently and well and left the room less than two minutes after he had entered it. Passing the bathroom, he paused just long enough to fill the sink with water, then let it gurgle noisily down the drain. In the entrance hall he exchanged the metal box for an exact duplicate in his bag then, solemnly, entered the front room.

"Are you relaxed to the utmost?" he asked Mrs. Rosenkranz, who was sprawled at length on the divan.

"The utmost," she answered in a small, far-away voice.

"Then we begin. May I ask you, dear lady, just what is the cause of your distress?"

"Well, a pain really, here in my shoulder. The doctor said it was bursitis and he has been treating it, but it doesn't go away."

"Understandable, understandable," Ch'in murmured, his fingers moving lightly over the woman's arm. "There is much that modern medicine does not know, or will not recognize. The body contains certain channels through which the vital life energies flow. Normally the life force

rushes freely, the body functions at harmony with itself, all is serene. But if the body should suffer some disorder the flow is interrupted, the equilibrium of the body is disturbed and illness follows. However, cure is possible. On the meridians of the skin there are certain points where needles may be stuck. These act like spurs on a horse's flank, if you will pardon so crude an analogy, madam."

"Not at all, doctor—AAARH!" she gasped as the first needle went home, penetrating just enough to dangle, quivering, from her flesh. Unperturbed, Ch'in went on.

"Thusly, the nerve fibres of the autonomic nervous system are stimulated. The impulse goes to the lower centres of the brain, thence back to the diseased organ, which is restored once again to its normal balance."

"How wonderful, doctor," Mrs. Rosenkranz sighed. "Why, I do believe that I feel better already."

A cloud drifted across the face of the moon, shading the window for a moment. When it had passed a portion of the shadow seemed to remain behind, a hump of darkness. The window slid open, slowly and silently, and the darkness moved into the room, freezing instantly when one of the two sleepers in the double bed stirred and mumbled. The intruder did not shift position until there was once again the slow, regular breathing of deep sleep. Only then did he go to the bed, and the moonlight glinted briefly on a metal canister. A soft hissing came from it and the sound of breathing became even deeper and slower. The canister vanished and a tiny spot of light flicked on, moving over the bed covers to fix on the sleeping woman's face. A gloved finger entered the circle of light, pulling down her eyelid so the white of the eyeball showed. She did not move. The light shifted over to the man where the process was repeated. A pleased hum came from the dark figure and the circle of light expanded, then swooped over to the painting on the wall.

The silence was broken sharply since there was now no chance of awakening the sleepers. First a clank of metal, then the whine of a powerful electric drill biting deep, and moments later a muffled boom and a yard-long tongue of flame. The intruder rapidly emptied the safe of its contents, but paused before leaving. His hand held an

envelope in the cone of light and, with utmost caution, he removed a strand of human hair and pulled it over the fractured hinge of the safe until it caught. The envelope yielded up one more tiny fragment, a strand of wool that was lodged under a splinter on the windowsill. Only then did the man gather up his equipment and leave as silently as he had come. The couple in the bed slept on, undisturbed.

Jeff O'Hare was happy. There was more than a touch of spring in the air and he drove with the window rolled down and his elbow propped lazily in the opening. Over the river seagulls swooped and dived, white against the blue sky, crying raucously. Very pastoral, he thought, or was that the right word? The road widened ahead and the few hundred yards of extra lane were signposted **WARNING—FOR EMERGENCY REPAIRS ONLY**. A hot dog truck, apparently in urgent need of emergency repairs, had pulled in there, along with four other repair-needing cars, the drivers of which had forgotten the emergency long enough to engulf a hot-dog or two. Jeff, feeling the need for emergency repairs to his stomach as well, swerved in and braked behind the last car. The gulls screamed and swooped low for fragments of roll.

With his shoulders against the warm metal of the car, Jeff wiped the last trace of mustard from his lips and sleepily watched the river surge by. A rapid *beep-beep* cut through his repose, and he reached through the window of the car to pick up the handset of the telephone.

"O'Hare's breakdown service, on call day and night. May we help you with your breakdown? It's either us or a good alienist."

"That's enough of playing the fool, Mr. O'Hare," his secretary, Sally Parker's voice snapped in his ear. "I would not be calling you unless the matter was urgent."

"CWACC matters are always urgent," Jeff said, sighing loudly. "Tell me the worst. Clouds have already gathered over my sunny day."

"I've just received a call from Doctor Ch'in. He left his number and wants you to call back at once. He sounded very unhappy."

"Hand-holding on a twenty-four hour basis, a CWACC

service," Jeff grumbled as he wrote the number down on his cuff. As soon as Sally had disconnected he rang the operator and placed the call. Ch'in picked it up on the first ring.

"I pray this is you I am talking to, Mr. O'Hare," he said in a shrill, worried voice.

"Have no fear, O'Hare is here. What's the problem?"

"I dare not tell you, the public telephone, you know."

"I don't know, but I can well imagine. Do you want me to meet you?"

"Yes, please, I beg of you, it would be most generous. If you would be so kind as to come here to my humble dwelling I will explain. I will give you exact instructions for finding the back entrance to the building."

"I usually use the front door, except when I'm delivering groceries . . ."

"No, please, the back way. Unobserved. I am afraid, the front, the entrance, it is . . . what shall I say . . .?"

"Watched. Is that the word? But what does that have to do with me? There's nothing to conceal . . ."

"When you arrive I will explain all," Ch'in wailed, his already shrill voice rising another octave. "I humbly implore you to grant this small favour."

Jeff shrugged and gave in. Back doors, fire escapes, dumb-waiters, they were all part of the job. Ch'in's address joined his phone number on the cuff. Jeff hung up, climbed into the car and gunned it to life.

Following directions, he had parked his car three blocks away from the address and used a connecting alleyway. This opened into a rubbish-littered area way behind a decaying apartment house. Jeff picked his way through the rusting beer cans and fragments of bottles dropped from the windows above, and down the three ash-covered steps to the rear door. This ancient and battered object creaked open only after he had leaned heavily against it, and took almost as much effort to close behind him. While he was doing this he saw the toe protruding from the darkened doorway across the way. It was the thick, dusty toe of a thick, dusty shoe, presumably attached to a thick, dusty cop. He knew all about shoes like that. The door groaned shut and he climbed thoughtfully up the dark stairwell to Ch'in's apartment where he gave

the prescribed, coded knock. A worried, fingernail-chewing Ch'in let him in.

"I am so glad you came, Mr. O'Hare, ever grateful."

"This place is being watched by the cops. Did you know that?"

"How keen of you to penetrate to the core of the problem instantly. Yes, there is the eternal watcher, across the street, he is visible from this front window."

"That's number two. I was talking about the one at the back door."

"Surrounded," Ch'in gasped, and fell weakly into a battered armchair. "They follow me, night and day, I know no peace. I have a shameful confession to make, dear Mr. O'Hare."

"You've been in trouble with the fuzz before and it looks like they are still keeping an eye on you?"

"True! Oh, how true! Your insight astonishes me, indeed you must have oriental blood."

"The O'Hares got around a lot, I wouldn't doubt it. But down to cases, Ch'in. What's bugging you?"

"They give me no peace." Ch'in wrung his hands together, then nipped off a piece of nail that had escaped him so far. "They are at my heels constantly. I am a sensitive man. My work suffers. I am afraid to go out. Today I wished to bring you my first month's reports and obtain some new forms, yet I feared to venture forth."

"Relax, doc. If your nose is clean you have nothing to worry about. I know this bunch, and if they had anything on you they would have picked you up before this. They're probably trying to make you jittery enough to blow town. Be strong. Tell you what I'll do. We'll take my car and drive down to my office. I'll give you some new forms and some old bourbon, then show you a way out of the building that will shake your tails. You can breathe the air of freedom that way, at least for awhile."

"Gratitude is a small word, but it is all I can offer. Yes, in your company I can face them, and the bourbon is indeed more warming than the finest rice wine. From your haven I will sally forth to a small hotel where I shall rest and administer unto myself a few needles to restore the peaceful flow of the life forces."

"You do that. A jab of the old needle is always cheering."

Ch'in collected his briefcase and coat and they left. There were two pairs of thick shoes waiting in the opposite doorway when they left, but Jeff ignored them. A car followed them all the way to the office. Ch'in did not appear to notice this and Jeff didn't draw it to his attention. By the time they had reached the office the acupuncturist was almost smiling.

"You have some calls, Mr. O'Hare," Sally said when they came in.

"File them for the moment, my love. I'm going into conference with the good doctor and am not to be disturbed. You understand?"

"I understand," she said coldly. "Drinking again in the afternoon and leaving me to do all the work."

Jeff was his most hospitable. He gave Ch'in the soft chair within arm's reach of the open bar, uncorked a new bottle of *Jack Daniels* and put on an ethnic recording of unaccompanied *sheng* and *chu*. The wailing, pentatonic notes filled the room and Ch'in beamed with pleasure.

"You have filled my cup of happiness to the brim," he said. "Mere words are incapable of expressing my emotions."

"All part of the CWACC service. Now, if you would be so kind as to give me your completed forms, I'll supply you with new ones."

They exchanged and Ch'in was just stowing the blanks away in his briefcase when Sally rang through on the intercom. "A gentleman who calls himself Sergeant Mannheimer is here to see you."

"Tell him to wait," Jeff said.

"Mannheimer!" Ch'in hissed. "My personal demon from the innermost rings of hell who haunts me night and day like a striking incubus."

"As neat a description of the man as I have ever heard," Jeff said. "I gather then that you don't wish to meet him?"

"Save me!"

"There is precedent for this emergency. If you will grab up your briefcase and come this way." Jeff went to the row of file cabinets and pulled on the *K to L* and *S to T* at the same time. The stack of files moved forward and

swung out to reveal a small room containing only a camp chair and another bottle of bourbon in a wire rack on the wall. "Rest here and contemplate. I'll call you as soon as the bulldog of the law has gone."

Mannheimer stamped in, his tiny eyes shooting glances around the room like bouncing beebees.

"I'm looking for a con man name of Ch'in. Where is he?" Mannheimer said.

"Obviously not here or you would see him. You may leave."

"Don't play smart with me, O'Hare. Ch'in came into this building with you and wasn't seen going out."

"Dr. Ch'in has departed and only the incompetence of your flat-footed and thick-headed associates prevented his exit from being noted."

"You standing on that story?" Mannheimer asked, a trace of a grin at the corners of his mouth.

"You can leave, sergeant, I have work to do."

"Sure, anything you say, O'Hare. See you around."

He turned and thudded out, and there was definitely a smile on his meaty chops this time. Jeff frowned, puzzled, wondering what mischief was lurking in the dusty corrugations of that tiny brain.

Once the door was sealed, Jeff released a grateful Ch'in and they had another drink before Jeff led the way to one of the more unobtrusive exits from the building.

The affairs of CWACC are always urgent and Jeff found the rest of the day taken up with details and administrative decisions. Memory of the sergeant's mysterious smile was buried beneath a horde of other details, while Ch'in's reports were covered by a flood of papers. It took more than a week to work down to them, and a sunny, Monday morning found Jeff puzzling over the pages of minuscule handwriting.

"Perhaps they're in Chinese," he muttered. "Do you read Chinese, Sally?"

"Spanish, French, German and Italian," she said, pencil poised over her shorthand pad. "Are you ready to begin dictation yet?"

"Patience. I can't dictate until I have something to say. Take a look in the top drawer there and see if you can find the big magnifying glass." He took it from her and

bent close. "That did it, it's in English all right, but Ch'in is in the wrong profession—he should be writing the Encyclopaedia Britannica on grains of rice or some such. And the detail! Listen to this. . . . entered the house at 1610 hours, climbing the stairs of twenty-four steps to the first floor, then left to the bath where I cleansed seventeen needles . . ." And there are pages more like this! I said detailed reports, but there is such a thing as going too far."

The phone rang and he took it up.

"Mr. O'Hare," a woman whispered, "you must drop everything, come at once, quickly!"

"Who is this?" Jeff said, in the same hushed tones. "And why are we whispering?"

"I'm afraid they'll overhear me, I'm using the extension in the kitchen. It's my husband, Harvey—Harvey Rosenkranz—he and some other men, they have poor Doctor Ch'in here. They are making all kinds of horrible threats, calling him names, shouting about calling the police, citizen's arrest, things like that. You must help! Doctor Ch'in gave me your number, told me you would come."

"Help is on the way," Jeff said. "Just give me your address and stall for time until I get there."

The traffic was light and by bending some of the motorizing regulations Jeff reached the house within ten minutes. Since the front door was open an inch, Mrs. Rosenkranz's work no doubt, he walked in and headed towards the sound of loud and angry masculine voices. A group of men, six of them, crowded around the sofa, almost completely concealing the spare form of Ch'in. They seemed to have a lot to say to him, none of it good, and his tiny feet twitched with each separate roared condemnation.

"Just what's going on here?" Jeff bellowed, out-bellowing the loudest of them. Startled faces turned towards him. "Who're you?" the nearest man asked.

Jeff took out his wallet and flipped it open to show them a gold badge. He also flipped it shut again before they could read the incised words on it which read: JEFFRY O'HARE DIRECTOR OF CWACC. "Now, which one of you called the police?" he asked.

"I did, officer," a stocky man with a red face said, stepping forward. "My name is Rosenkranz. And I must say

the police are getting efficient, I couldn't have phoned more than three minutes ago."

"Modern crime detection is based upon rapid communication and apprehension," Jeff said mellifluously. "Now what is the complaint?" He took out a notebook and a pencil.

The men moved apart to reveal Ch'in sitting, quivering, on the couch. "It's this quack," Rosenkranz said, pointing an accusing finger at Ch'in. "He has been treating our wives with quackery, sticking them with magic pins or something like that, absolute nonsense. It's been going on some time now, we only found out about it by accident. Some of us, Brian there, Tom and I, are engineers, we all work for Spatial Researchers. We got to talking a couple of days ago and found ourselves comparing notes on this Ch'in character. Then we did a little detective work among our wives' friends and came up with some more poor women who were being duped. We just got together, made our plans—and walked in this afternoon and caught this guy giving my wife the business."

"The shock," Mrs. Rosenkranz said weakly from the doorway, "I don't think I shall ever get over it." Everyone ignored her.

"That guy had pins stuck in her!" one of the men said indignantly. "Stuck right into her like he was sewing up a roasting chicken or something!"

"Very good," Jeff said sternly, scribbling in his book, "which of you is lodging a complaint?"

"We all are," Rosenkranz told him.

"Then you have all been treated by Dr. Ch'in?" Jeff asked.

"No, none of us has, just our wives, didn't you get that?"

"Then which wife is lodging a complaint?"

"None of them. Look, officer, you don't seem to be getting the point. Our wives have been taken in by this phoney, they *like* him. We're doing them a favour by getting rid of the guy."

"You would do yourself a favour if you looked up the law before you bothered the police," Jeff said sternly, slamming shut his notebook. "You can no more put Dr. Ch'in into jail because you witnessed him practising acu-

puncture than you could have a chiropractor arrested for doing bone adjustment."

"But this is different," one of the men protested. "This nut is practising medicine without a licence."

"Is he?" Jeff queried. "Can you prove that? Remember what we call 'medicine' is really allopathy, a system of drug treatment of the body, one of the many kinds of medicine in the world today. And Dr. Ch'in was not practising allopathic medicine, he was practising acupuncture, a form of medicine far older than any western medicine, they have been using it for over 5,000 years in China. Do you have medical degrees, doctor?" he asked Ch'in.

"Many," Ch'in said weakly, "from the finest schools and universities. I can show you . . ."

"No need," Jeff said, "I think the point has been proven."

"B-but . . . it's nonsense!" Rosenkranz exploded.

"Is it?" Jeff said coldly. "Tell that to the British Acupuncture Society—which by the way has a hospital in London—and the other allied groups. Tell it to all the people who have been treated by acupuncture and are willing to stand up in court and attest to its value. Tell it to everyone in China, since there acupuncture is practised side-by-side with western medicine and patients have their choice of which they want."

"It just can't be," one of the men said plaintively. "You just can't affect a person's health or body processes by sticking a needle into him."

"You stick a frog with a needle," Jeff said, "and in certain circumstances it is enough to induce a variety of artificial insemination. If pregnancy isn't an effect on the body's processes—what is? So perhaps there is something to acupuncture that ought to be studied, not dismissed out of hand."

Mrs. Rosenkranz brought Ch'in a glass of water which he accepted with murmured thanks. No one else spoke.

"Anyone here want to make any charges to the police?" Jeff asked. The answer was silence.

"Who got charges for the police?" a familiar rumbling voice said from the doorway.

"No one," Jeff said, turning and bestowing his most

angelic smile on Mannheimer. "It was all a vast mistake, sergeant, no charges will be made."

"What are you doing here, O'Hare?"

"Aiding you, sergeant, straightening out a mess before it got started, saving the city money. I think these men have mistaken me—completely by chance of course—for a police officer, and have explained their problem to me. I, in turn, have been instrumental in showing them that they have no problem."

Mannheimer absorbed this information, frowning in concentration as he funnelled it through his rusty thinking apparatus until, finally, it produced a result. "Any of you people got a complaint?" he asked.

The silence continued until one of the men said, unhappily, "We thought we did, but I guess we don't. But this Ch'in is a quack, I know it, there must be something we can do?"

"Get him on an assault charge?" Rosenkranz suggested hopefully. "After all, he did stick needles into my wife."

"But she asked him to," another engineer said, "that won't wash. Maybe there is some other charge the police can hit him with, vagrancy or barratry or something."

"Burglary," Rosenkranz said, "this house was burglarized just a couple of days after he was here, my safe was blown right out of the wall. Maybe we can pin that on him?"

"Why not?" one of the others said eagerly. "My place was broken into too, after he had been there, got my wife's jewellery."

A happy chorus followed as all of the man present chimed in and discovered that they had all been victims of burglary within days of Ch'in's coming to their houses. They glared at the man who shrank deeper into the couch. "I am innocent, innocent," he said faintly.

"No he's not," Rosenkranz shouted happily. "Arrest him, officer. Do your duty."

Mannheimer nodded ponderously. "I guess I'll have to do just that." He struggled with the back of his belt and managed to unhook his handcuffs. "I can reveal that we have been making a highly secret investigation of the crimes mentioned and have been closing in. But I better

make the arrest now because I don't want this criminal to blow town or anything now that he knows the heat's on."

He took one step forward and snapped the cuffs on Jeff's wrists. For the first time in his life Jeff was too surprised to say a word.

"Jeffry O'Hare," Mannheimer intoned, fighting to control a victorious smile, "I am arresting you for burglary."

Jeff spluttered and found his voice. "Are you out of your pointed little head!"

"Confess, O'Hare, throw yourself on the mercy of the court, the evidence of your crimes is too overwhelming." He whistled shrilly through his teeth and another detective poked his head into the room. "Get out to O'Hare's car," Mannheimer ordered, "and give it a good shaking down. Impound any evidence you find."

"Just a minute," Rosenkranz protested as the second detective left, "haven't you got the wrong man?"

"The right one. We had an eye on this character for a long time, and Ch'in there has been co-operating with us to collect evidence. We got the case sewed up."

"Loyalty," Jeff said, giving Ch'in his most hurt look. "Is this how you repay the help you have received?"

"Truth will out," Ch'in said calmly. "You have aided me, Mr. O'Hare, but I cannot let gratitude stand between me and my duty. When the police produced evidence of your crimes I had no choice but to help them."

"That's right, O'Hare," Mannheimer said, "we got you nailed to the wall this time. You asked Ch'in to write very detailed reports of the houses he visited, so you could break in, and we have copies of them all. Ch'in showed us how to enter a secret room in your office in which we found certain articles that were on a list of stolen items. We have even identified a human hair from the blown Rosenkranz safe as being yours."

"I found these hidden in the spare tyre of his car, sergeant," the detective said, entering the room with a large fistful of jewellery in a cloth.

"My wife's necklace!" one of the men shouted.

"Confess, O'Hare, the jig is up," Mannheimer gloated.

"I smell a very, very strong frameup," Jeff said, rattling his handcuffs gloomily. "I suppose you wouldn't take under consideration the thought that Ch'in might have

planted those things in my office and in my car, and wrote those reports to throw blame on me?"

"It won't wash," Mannheimer told him. "With this stuff from your car we got all the stolen goods back. Why should he go to the trouble to heist all this stuff just to turn it back in?"

"Because he had very good reasons of his own," a voice said from the doorway.

"Dobbs, the lawyer," Mannheimer said, blinking rapidly. "What are you doing here?"

"Dobbs, yes, that is my name, and I am a lawyer, though I have never practised. Most F.B.I. men have law degrees." He held a shiny badge before Mannheimer's bulging eyes. "I am moving a little faster than I wanted to, but I'm afraid you have forced my hand."

"What are you talking about?" Mannheimer shouted. "You said you were a lawyer, you raised the bail to get Ch'in out of the can."

"That's right. We have been on his trail for a long time and didn't want your lead-footed police force to get in our way. It was imperative that we release him from jail and get him back in operation."

"Puncturing people?" Mannheimer gaped.

"Not entirely. He is just as good a second story man as he is a doctor, perhaps better. He is also a Chinese agent . . ."

"Whadaya mean!" Ch'in protested in healthy lower-New York City accents. "I'm as good an American as any punk here and I can prove it, my name is Sammy Chin and I got a birth certificate."

"Don't bother, Major," Dobbs said, "we have located the real Sammy Chin working in a restaurant in Dallas. He's a little simple, but he did tell us how he sold his papers to 'a friend'. You are that friend, Major, and far from being an American, you are a member of the dreaded Pa-Jak-Ang-Tong. PJAT, the secret service . . ."

Ch'in pushed the nearest man away and dived for the door. The only person in his way was Jeff who put out a foot and tripped him up. Ch'in fell and rolled, but kept moving. He reached the hall door but skidded to a stop in front of the hard-eyed man who appeared there and pointed a large revolver at him.

"Very good," Dobbson said happily, "I was hoping you would make a break for it. We've caught him off his guard and there is a good chance that he may have what we want right out there in his briefcase."

"He does, sir," the man with the gun said, pointing it unwaveringly at Ch'in. "I went through it while you were all busy in here. The microfilms are there for most of the circuitry of the Attila rocket."

"That's our new project . . ." Rosenkranz said, stunned. "How could he get it?"

"From you gentlemen here," Dobbson said. "Security has been aware that some of you have been taking work home, and they have said nothing to you in the hopes we could catch our fish here. We have. He burgled the houses and took items of value to cover his interest in the papers. He wanted information, not jewellery, which is why he was so free with the merchandise needed to attempt the frame-up of Mr. O'Hare." He turned and aimed a stern, federal frown at Mannheimer. "There are no charges against Mr. O'Hare, he is to be released at once. And in the future, sergeant, you would be wiser not to conspire with criminals in an attempt to gain evidence against an honest citizen. It could have an effect on the future of your career. If you understand me?"

Mannheimer could only nod numbly as he fumbled to unlock the handcuffs. Dobbson shook Jeff's hand as soon as it was freed.

"Our apologies and our thanks, Mr. O'Hare. We want you to understand that you have rendered a great service to your country by permitting this agent to frame evidence against you. There has of course never been any doubt of your complete innocence. You will receive an official letter of gratitude for your aid."

"Perfectly all right," Jeff said. "Frame me any time you like as long as it works out like this. But just answer one question. Is Ch'in really an acupuncturist?"

"Top of his profession in China, we understand he has even treated Mao."

Mrs. Rosenkranz smiled. "Just wait until I tell the girls," she said. "The prices he charged we got a real bargain. But what will we do for a doctor now?"

"Why don't you ask Ch'in," Jeff said, "perhaps he can suggest someone."

"What a lovely idea!" she turned to Ch'in who hung limply in the big F.B.I. man's clutches.

Dobbson told Mrs. Rosenkranz that she could not talk to the prisoner, her husband told her to leave the room, she told him he was being cruel, the engineers were all arguing with each other, all except one who was shouting at Mannheimer.

Jeff smiled, waved to the unseeing crowd, and left.

— HARRY HARRISON

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